

Changing the Air Force Narrative

Think Tank

Class 14E

Squadron Officer School

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## Executive Summary

This study seeks to answer questions posed by the Chief of Staff of the Air Force regarding ways to improve the Air Force narrative to better resonate with the American people. Means of connecting bold new Air, Space, and Cyberspace solutions to specific national and geopolitical problems of importance to the public are identified. The research team recommends multiple courses of action by utilizing current research and literature in the public polls, social concerns, branding, advertising and marketing. Furthermore, the team focuses on the Air Force's unique ability to solve what the American public deemed as vexing problems through its use of innovative and technological bold solutions. Current narrative issues, culture impact and design are reviewed proving the importance of connecting internal and external messaging. The USAF's current external narrative is centered on the mission of "Fly, Fight and Win ... in Air, Space and Cyberspace." While this narrative adequately addresses what the USAF does and how it does it, the narrative does not adequately address why the USAF mission, core competencies and distinctive capabilities are important to the nation. The public is left to make their own determinations on why these things are important. The research team proposes changing the narrative from "Critical Enablers" to "Defending America's Horizons" by focusing on external storytelling, connecting emotionally to the public and centering all messaging on WHY the Air Force is important. These changes can be accomplished through the use of television and social media advertising that focuses on the unique, bold solutions the Air Force presents to the multitude of vexing issues facing America today. Additionally, the team champions refining the messaging processes to focus on a unified effort between recruiting and Public Affairs while publicizing contributions of everyday Airmen.

## Changing the Air Force Narrative: Starting With Why

An organization's ability to posture itself in society, politics and culture relies on the unique and distinct story it tells. Public perception, organizational actions and individual influences evolve from the interactions between members of the organization and outsiders. How the Air Force tells its story, both internally and externally, contributes to the American public's view of the service's importance, influence, and capabilities. To achieve maximum effectiveness, an organization's narrative must be presented in a way that resonates with outsiders. This study strives to identify recommendations for Air Force senior leaders based on the questions posed to the Squadron Officer School Class 14E Think Tank by the Chief of Staff of the Air Force: *How can the Air Force best communicate its unique ability to use "innovative technologies and concepts" to address specific geopolitical and national problems? What examples might resonate best with the American people, and through which media outlets should the Air Force deliver its messages?* To best understand what is driving the concern over lack of resonance, a detailed background study and literature review was conducted.

### **Problem Background**

In 2010, the RAND Corporation conducted a study on "how the Air Force contributes uniquely to the nation's security" (Thornhill, 2012). The study's conclusion was that the Air Force, more than any other service, excels at finding innovative solutions to difficult national security problems. The study also emphasized the importance of internal culture to the Air Force's ability to continue innovating. These findings prompted RAND's Paula Thornhill to write a paper on the Air Force's different cultural narratives throughout its history. She identified five different narratives, beginning with "Over Not Through" (referring to the airplane's unique ability to fly over the trenches that defined ground combat in World War I) and

progressing to the current narrative, which developed during the Global War on Terror: “We Are Critical Enablers” (Thornhill, 2012).

Another RAND study conducted by Alan Vick in 2014 used Thornhill’s narratives to frame an examination of several polls and surveys on the Air Force conducted between 1935 and 2014 (Vick, 2014). Perhaps the most striking finding concerns the American public’s opinion on the importance of the Air Force relative to the other services. Gallup Polls conducted between 1949 and 1960 showed overwhelmingly that the American public viewed the Air Force as the most important branch of the military. In 1949 fully 84% of those surveyed named the Air Force the most important service; that number declined steadily but remained a significant majority (60%) in 1960. When these polls were conducted again between 2001 and 2011, public opinion had changed drastically. The Air Force’s popularity fell to a low of 17% in 2011 before rising slightly to its current position at 23%. In the most recent survey, conducted in May 2014, all branches were within a few percentage points of each other (Gallup, 2014). The Air Force’s narrative through this time was “We Are Critical Enablers” (Vick, 2014). Although there were some slight differences in the phrasing of the questions from year to year, the general concept remained the same in these surveys.

From April to May 2014, RAND conducted a separate survey and added another option, allowing people to select that all branches are equally important. Respondents overwhelmingly (53%) viewed all branches as equally important. Among the individual services, the Air Force was back in the lead at 17% with roughly ten points over the other branches. But Vick went on to point out that even in the Gallup polls, the percentage difference between the highest and lowest service has been dropping steadily since the early 1950s (Vick, 2014).

## **Implications**

In many ways, the convergence of public opinion indicated by the Gallup polls and the preference for equal importance of all services in the RAND study are positives for the United States military. After all, the services have worked very hard over the last several decades to transform themselves into a joint, interdependent team, and they have largely succeeded. The public's views in many ways reflect that joint focus. These changes also likely have much to do with the nature of the conflicts the U.S. faced at the time each of these polls was taken. In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, the predominant threat was nuclear war with the Soviet Union, and the American people saw the Air Force as having the key role in deterring that threat. The focus on ground operations such as counterinsurgency in recent decades, in conjunction with increased media coverage of those operations, has elevated the Army and Marine Corps in the eyes of the public and relegated the Air Force to a supporting role. As reflected by its "Critical Enablers" narrative, the Air Force has embraced this role, which again should be seen as a good thing: we took on the missions our joint partners and the nation needed us to perform, and we excelled at them. But the risk in this is that the American people may lose sight of the full spectrum of capabilities the Air Force can offer. Yes, we are critical enablers—but we are also much more.

The Air Force's importance as an enabling force is evidenced by such key missions as close air support, transport, aeromedical evacuation and other support missions. However, the Air Force also carries out many other missions that it is solely and uniquely qualified to perform. Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA) operations, persistent Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), air-to-air combat, air-to-ground combat, space operations, nuclear deterrence, cyberspace security, and myriad other missions make the Air Force the nation's elite power-projection platform. The Air Force is the only service that can take action against any

target in the world at any given moment. Constant innovation, leveraging key technological advancements, allows us to deliver global effects with immediacy.

Ensuring a strong and well-rounded public image for the Air Force is important for several reasons. First, public perception of the Air Force as the most innovative, technologically advanced branch will help ensure we continue to recruit the best and brightest. Second, the Air Force needs broad public support in order to continue to push the envelope technologically. In an era of constrained budgets, it is all the more important that we be able to advocate strongly for research and development funding. Finally, a pervasive belief that the Air Force is fundamentally a support service could influence political leaders to limit our freedom of action in an operational context in favor of greater oversight and subordination to the needs of our sister services. The changing attitudes towards the Air Force indicated in the Gallup polls and RAND study could translate directly into the loss of combat effectiveness.

Ultimately, the Air Force should not be overly concerned with its polling numbers relative to the other services. Vick suggested that it is unrealistic to expect any service to ever again achieve the level of public opinion dominance the Air Force held in the mid-twentieth century (Vick, 2014). Furthermore, the Air Force's rise in the most recent poll (from 17% to 23%) may indicate that the downward trend has reversed, or at least stabilized. But the mere fact that the polling numbers and internal narrative issues have caught the attention of so many senior leaders and analysts is indicative of a deeper problem: the Air Force is failing to clearly tell its story to the American people, and it must find a better way to do so.

### **Purpose Statement**

To better connect with the public, the Air Force must change the story it tells, and the way it tells that story. This study seeks to improve the Air Force narrative to better resonate with

the American people. The study will break down the current narrative, identify its weaknesses, and suggest ways to fix those weaknesses. The research team will develop a new narrative that fully encompasses the service's unique ability to deal with a multitude of vexing national security problems. Finally, the team will propose a fully integrated, multi-pronged media effort to communicate that new narrative to the public.

### **Weaknesses of the Current Air Force Narrative**

To identify ways to improve the Air Force narrative, weaknesses of the current narrative must first be understood. Areas such as internal versus external identity and messaging and organizational branding were explored.

#### **No Clear Internal Identity**

Developing a clear internal identity, while one of the most challenging aspects of building a culture, is essential to being able to properly communicate an organization's story. The Air Force's failure to connect with the American people is due in part to the fact that it has been sending a fractured message (Vick, 2014). Thornhill (2012) stated that "five distinct cultural identities, rather than one, dominant identity seem to emerge: 'over not through' (World War I and immediate aftermath), 'give me liberty' (interwar period), 'victory through air power' (World War II), 'peace is our profession' (Cold War), and 'we are critical enablers' (Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom)." Before it can effectively tell its story to others, the service must first clarify its internal narrative. Clarity of internal messaging allows buy-in from members, presents a clear identity, and provides a foundation for external messaging. A clear identity will enable more Airmen to become advocates of airpower, better able to explain to the public what they do and why it is important.

#### **Current External Focus is on "WHAT" The USAF Does**

Increasing the resonance of the external USAF narrative with the American public is similar to a corporation gaining influence through a carefully crafted branding campaign. Simon Sinek's (2009) *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* differentiates successful narratives from unsuccessful narratives based on the structure of their delivery. The framework provided by Sinek provides "an alternative perspective to existing assumptions about why some leaders and organizations have achieved such a disproportionate degree of influence," and is built around the three types of information that a narrative can communicate: WHAT, HOW, and WHY (Sinek, 2009). First, a narrative can communicate WHAT the organization does. These are the products, goods, services or capabilities that the organization provides. A narrative can also detail HOW these products, goods, services or capabilities are provided. This category explains how an organization is unique or superior compared to other options. Finally, under this framework, a narrative can also describe WHY an organization does what it does. This is an inherently a philosophical aspect of a narrative because it speaks to the purpose of the organization's existence (Sinek, 2009).

Sinek (2009) argued that all successful narratives transition chronologically from WHY to HOW to WHAT. With this narrative structure, "the WHY is offered as the reason to buy and the WHATs serve as the tangible proof of that belief" (Sinek, 2009). Most narratives tend to start with the WHAT because these are the easiest to identify and explain. Similarly, these narratives will avoid the WHY, since the philosophical abstractions are harder to relate. Sinek (2009) also argued that defining an organization on WHAT it does can impose a cultural rigidness and decrease the organization's flexibility in adapting to new opportunities.

The Air Force's public website provides insight into the structure of the current Air Force narrative (<http://www.airforce.com/learn-about/our-mission/>). The service's current external

narrative is centered on its mission to “Fly, Fight and Win ... in Air, Space and Cyberspace.” This mission statement is followed by the vision statement of “Global Vigilance, Reach and Power.” Additional details include five distinctive capabilities. While this narrative adequately addresses WHAT the Air Force does (“Fly, Fight and Win... in Air, Space and Cyber Space”) and HOW it does it (“Global Vigilance, Reach and Power”) it does not adequately address WHY the Air Force mission, core competencies and distinctive capabilities are important to the nation. The public is left to make their own determinations on why these things are important. The absence of WHY diminishes the resonance of the USAF narrative. “When a WHY goes fuzzy, it becomes much more difficult to maintain the growth, loyalty and inspiration that helped drive the original success” (Sinek, 2009). Simon Sinek’s ideas have already been embraced by many Air Force senior leaders. His book was on the Chief of Staff’s reading list and has been read by a large population within the military. The concepts presented and adopted are simply not making it outside of the Air Force and have not entered into the narrative.

### **Improving the Narrative: Building the Air Force Brand and Image**

The Air Force can substantially improve its narrative by following the examples of businesses that have built strong, successful brands and images for themselves. At the heart of any good marketing strategy is an organization’s brand positioning. It is the “act of designing the company’s offer and image so that it occupies a distinct and valued place in the target customer’s minds” (Keller, 2013). The Air Force brand encompasses the full spectrum of security options that it provides to the customer: the American people.

### **Utilizing Business Storytelling Models**

*“Of all the ways we communicate with one another, the story has established itself as the most comfortable, the most versatile--and perhaps also the most dangerous. Stories touch all of us, reaching across cultures and generations, accompanying humanity down the centuries.*”

*Assembling facts or incidents into tales is the only form of expression and entertainment that most of us enjoy equally at age three and age seventy-three.”*

- **Robert Fulford**, *The Triumph of Narrative*

Two of the most recognized brands in America today are Apple and Google. In 2013 both companies unseated Coca-Cola from the top position in Interbrand’s Best Global Brands (Interbrand, 2013). Both of these companies have been rising for some time and their position is well deserved. Apple in particular is viewed as enabling “so many people to do so much so easily, which is why Apple has legions of adoring fans” (Interbrand, 2013). Both of these companies also have powerful messages that resonate with their target audiences. Google’s corporate motto of “don’t be evil” is visible in many of the innovative projects they do including providing 3G Internet to remote locations via solar-powered balloons (Interbrand, 2013). Using Sinek (2009) arguments, these companies are so successful because they approach marketing and branding from a completely different perspective than most companies.

Further, as the Air Force communicates its importance to the public, it is vital to do so in the genre of story. Giles Lury, Executive Chairman and Director of Branding of The Value Engineers Limited, describes storytelling as “increasingly used in advertising today in order to build customer loyalty. This marketing trend echoes the deeply rooted need of all humans to be entertained. Stories are illustrative, easily memorable, and allow any firm to create stronger emotional bonds with the customers” (Lury, Mar 2012). Storytelling is becoming more influential and regularly utilized among Fortune 500 Companies. Smith (2012) stated, “Storytelling has come of age in the business world. Today, many of the most successful companies use storytelling as a leadership tool.” At Nike, all senior executives are designated “corporate storytellers.” The company even created a Senior Director of Culture and Heritage position who does not physically sell items but works to root the corporate culture and maintain

the company's identity. The group was interested in this concept and interviewed the Director, Mr. Nelson Ferris. Nike leadership begins every meeting with a personal story emphasizing lessons learned and ties the individual's actions directly to the company's core vision, a process rooted in tradition (Ferris personal communication, 2014). 3M banned bullet point statements years ago and replaced them with a process of writing strategic narratives. Procter and Gamble hired Hollywood directors to teach its executives storytelling techniques (Smith, 2012). The reason for this is simple: stories have the ability to engage an audience the way logic and bullet points alone never could. "Whether you are trying to communicate a vision, sell an idea, or inspire commitment, storytelling is a powerful business tool that can mean the difference between mediocre results and phenomenal success" (Smith, 2012). As we seek to capture a diverse public, leveraging the peculiar advantages of 'story' in external narratives could bring surprisingly beneficial results.

### **Building Emotional Connections**

It is vital that the Air Force communicate its story to the American public by targeting the heart, not the head. A recent Air Force advertising campaign was built around the theme of, "It's not science fiction, it's what we do everyday." This theme emphasized the Air Force's advanced technological capabilities, but failed to go beyond that surface level to connect with audiences. In contrast, the United States Marine Corps' long-time advertising emphasis, "The Few, the Proud, the Marines," appeals to the heart. Nishi (2013) explained that organizations must "find ways to connect with your audience on an emotional level. Neuroscientists have discovered that most decisions—whether people realize it or not—are informed by emotional responses." Additionally, Simmons (2007) emphasized, "the unique power of stories comes from not only

stimulating feelings but also focusing them on a specific goal.” To best tell its story, the Air Force must tap into the emotions of the nation.

### **How to Effectively Connect with Groups**

Research on media usage and advertising for different demographics shaped a strategy to allow the Air Force to reach a maximum audience. The age range of the audience polled by the RAND Corporation also drove the research process. The respondents to the survey span the generational gaps of the Millennials (1980 - 2000), Generation X (1965 - 1979), and the Baby Boomers (1946 – 1964). Knowing the target generational audience of the Air Force’s story will be key. Nielsen is an advertising research group that uses demographics to understand the effectiveness of advertising mediums and certain age groups. A Nielsen finding in the ‘Advertising and Audiences’ poll conducted in May 2014 shows that when viewers are paying more attention to a program, they will also pay more attention to the advertisements that air within that program (Nielsen, 2014). A key insight to any advertising strategy involves messages aired during times when audiences are engaged with the content of the program whether it is on the television, the internet or radio. The time the Air Force chooses to air its message should be during programs that involve learning or critical thinking since the audience will be more receptive to hearing related information, regardless of the medium.

News programs are likely to have audiences engaged in their content since they are providing current events that affect audiences’ daily lives. A media use evaluation poll conducted by Gallup asked audiences where they get their main source of news about current events in the U.S. and around the world. Results of this poll found that 26% of participants watch television news programs, 18% use internet news sources and only 4% get their news from radio programs (Gallup Analytics, 2014). There are mixed messages in the realm of advertising

as to whether or not reaching a larger audience will occur when using internet advertising over traditional television ads. However, results from a variety of surveys show that traditional television advertising remains the most effective for reaching all demographics. A Gallup poll seeking Americans' reasons for social media use found that 94% of social media users say they use this medium to connect with friends and family (Gallup, 2014). Only 40% say they also use it to find out information about a company or organization (Gallup, 2014). Most internet users are selective about their media sources and will only visit sites or view content that they consider credible and that falls in line with their individual beliefs (Vician, 2012). Thus using the internet for advertising raises the challenge of finding the sites that will seem most credible for the target demographic. However, the interactive nature of social media is one of the aspects that many people are drawn to (Vician, 2012). One benefit is that individuals can read a story and then enter into a dialogue about that story. Even if a story doesn't fall in line with that individual's values, there is still the chance of that individual reading the story just to enter into the dialogue. The percentage of the American public that uses social media networks for news is still relatively small although it has become an outlet for expediting response to social causes and political protests (Kahler, 2009).

Nike successfully utilized social media to advertise during the World Cup. They leveraged word of mouth by creating attention-grabbing videos that were shared at an exponential rate (Ferris personal communication, 2014). Nike did not use any other form of advertising during the World Cup and found great success with social media. The company also tracked where the commercial went and who was watching. The Air Force can couple its television campaigns with a push over social media.

A 2012 report by the Barnes and Noble College Marketing Division found that young adults say email and television commercials are the best way to reach them over other advertising mediums such as coupons or radio ads (Fine, 2014). This reflects the findings of a Nielsen report on the power of cross platform advertising in which Americans reported watching television approximately 170 hours per month, while only watching programs on the internet an average of 9 hours per month (Beard, 2014). This report also found that advertisements to young adults must be unique, varied and frequent (Beard, 2014). Adults ages 18 to 49 are avid consumers of media with frequent exposure to countless marketing messages; therefore, messages that stick with this audience must be attention grabbing and come from multiple mediums to obtain long-term retention (Fine, 2014).

The Department of Defense is always looking to reduce budget expenses. There is good news in the area of advertising length findings. Research shows that shorter message length can have the same results as longer versions of the same message. Thirty-second ads are currently the most common in most mediums; however, fifteen-second ads are on the rise (Nielsen, 2014). A Nielsen Neuro report found that quality-optimized, shortened ads performed as well or better than their original thirty-second counterparts (Nielsen, 2014). Additionally, it is best to limit the number of points in the message to three or less. If too many messages are presented it can lead to confusion about which point is the most important (Wigington, 2008).

### **Decoupling in the Public Perception**

*“I believe that air supremacy - in all its components - will be indispensable to maintaining American military strength, deterrence, and global reach for decades to come.”*

*- Secretary of Defense Robert Gates*

*“Only the USAF can bring to bear prompt, scalable delivery capabilities that can avoid insecure land routes and rapidly move people, equipment, and supplies into remote and dangerous areas at (relatively) low risk.”*

**- *Shaping the Future Air Force*, RAND Corporation 2006 Technical Report**

A successful narrative must emphasize and enhance the unique and irreplaceable contributions of the Air Force, in essence decoupling it from the other branches. To create a strong public perception, the new narrative must illustrate what the Air Force, and the Air Force alone, can bring to the fight. This can be done effectively by highlighting our core competencies and how these competencies solve what Americans view as the vexing problems of the nation.

**Identifying Geopolitical Problems That Resonate (“The Vexing Problems”)**

By turning on the news, one can find a plethora of difficult geopolitical problems facing our nation. Political and military leaders must confront issues from terrorism and Islamic extremism, underscored by the recent rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), to a resurgent Russia intent on flexing its muscles in eastern Europe, to continued conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, to humanitarian crises like the outbreak of ebola in Africa. Indeed, it could be argued that the most vexing problem facing America today is the multitude of vexing problems. Among all the military services, only the Air Force has the speed, range, and diversity of capabilities necessary to confront all of these issues simultaneously.

To identify some specific problems that are of particular concern to most Americans, the results of several recent Gallup and Pew Research Center polls on international and military affairs were analyzed. A Gallup poll conducted in February 2014 asked Americans what issues they considered critical threats to “the vital interests of the United States in the next 10 years.” International terrorism and the development of nuclear weapons by Iran were the most prevalent, with an overwhelming majority (77% and 76%, respectively) identifying them as critical threats. Also of high importance were Islamic fundamentalism (57%), conflict between North and South

Korea (53%), and the economic power of China (52%). China's military power was seen as less important, with only 46% of respondents rating it as critical. But since the potential for conflict with China is a major focus of future military planning, there is potential that the American people will strengthen their conviction that Chinese military power is a threat. Additionally, issues with China could be combined with the issue of North and South Korea into a single outreach effort focused on the possibility of conflict in the Pacific.

### **International Terrorism**

The American public has viewed international terrorism as the leading critical threat to our nation since September 11th, 2001 (Gallup, 2013). The Air Force is uniquely positioned to prove that it is the most important branch of service in combating this threat in the future. While the United States has been fighting terrorist cells and non-state actors in major conflicts around the world, future strategy has placed increased attention on developing IW capabilities in conjunction with conventional capabilities. The United States is fighting an enemy that has become powerful through the use of media, messaging, and technology while spreading ideals through integration with local populations (Sullivan, 2006). However, the current enemy does "lack and cannot effectively offset unfettered access to the high ground that superiority in air, space, and cyberspace provides" (AFDD 2-3). Understanding the capabilities of the Air Force within this strategy will aid in communicating the service's importance to the public.

The Air Force has embraced IW and managed to posture itself for future engagements. Pace (2006) described the key engagements of international terrorism and IW as the ability to strike centers of gravity – strategically, operationally and tactically. Through control of information, surveillance, tactical strike, agile combat support and rapid global mobility, the Air Force is not only supporting the counterterrorism and counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts, it leads

them. However, Jorgerst (2009) challenged the belief that the Air Force will be viewed as a supporting service if it only focuses on airpower. He asserts that while the power derived from the use of airpower in COIN is indisputable, the effort will never be an air campaign. With that realization, the Air Force still leads a successful effort due to its unique five core competencies, specifically ISR, C2 and global strike. Furthermore, the general public has become wary of accepting collateral damage in minor counterterrorism or COIN campaigns. The Air Force relieves this concern through operations that can be employed with varying degrees of intensity and with less intrusive processes (AFDD 2-3). Additionally, a public that is interested in focusing on domestic issues benefits from a service that can deliver a range of effects without increasing presence in the region, especially on the ground. These effects, if employed by the Air Force, reduce the risk to military members while enacting the desires of the United States (AFDD 2-3). The Air Force has the tools to lead the campaign against the public's most pressing issue not only abroad but at home as well.

While wars are waged overseas to defeat these non-state actors, the first key effort in the National Strategy to combat terrorism is to defend the homeland (Sullivan, 2006). Again, the Air Force is leading the way in this objective and should display this to the public. Air Superiority is vital to the success of any campaign and national defense. Since 1953 the Air Force has had air superiority in every campaign it's been involved in and has continued to strengthen this core competency (Pappalardo, 2014). In fact, a foreign aircraft has not killed a single American ground soldier during that time. This air superiority proves vital to protecting the homeland from any organization that may wish to do the United States harm through the skies. Current counterterrorism efforts focus on information operations, ISR, electronic warfare, network ops, and targeting, which are all either core competencies or strong capabilities of the Air Force.

The last two key elements for victory described by Sullivan (2006) are to attack terrorists and their capacity to operate effectively at home and abroad, and to support mainstream Muslim efforts to reject violent extremism. Any COIN campaign is not truly a military action but an engagement between political, social and ideological entities. Therefore, how the Air Force defines victory in future COIN or counterterrorism efforts will affect its ability to display its relevance and importance to the American people. Hock (2010) and al-Khuzaa'i (2009) both describe the need for building partner capacity (BPC) and developing foreign internal defense (FDI). These strategies will work to build foreign nation's air forces, and help to relieve the lion's share of air support from the Air Force. Eventually, these foreign air forces will be the key players in COIN operations, reducing the Air Force's footprint and resonating with the concerns of the American people. The Air Force can also instruct on C2 operations, utilizing the service's core competency and experience. This development of proven COIN concepts can be done through units such as the 6th Special Operations Squadron while maintaining the public's desire for low-visibility efforts with minimal collateral damage. The Air Force is postured to be the irreplaceable service while combating terrorism in the future.

### **Nuclear Deterrence**

Nuclear weapons have served as a strategic deterrent since their creation in World War II. The 1950s were marked by a buildup of nuclear weapons to buffer tensions between western states and the Soviet Union, while the 1990s were marked by nuclear arms control treaties to handle the uncertainty posed by post-Cold War Russia and the former Soviet states. The events of September 11th changed the nature of nuclear deterrence by sparking an aggressive campaign to eliminate international terrorism and prevent terrorist access to weapons of mass destruction

(WMD). The emerging threat posed by rogue state and non-state actors has shaped the modern nuclear deterrence strategy (Durr, 2002).

Nuclear deterrence is an inherent capability provided by the Air Force. DoDD 5100.01 directs the Air Force to "Conduct nuclear operations in support of strategic deterrence, to include providing and maintaining nuclear surety and capabilities". Additionally, the National Security Strategy states a key component of national security is to "Reverse the Spread of Nuclear and Biological Weapons and Secure Nuclear Materials". The public already understands the "why" of nuclear deterrence. It is important that the connection from the "why" is tied to the Air Force mission as the "What" and "How." This is also an area that the Air Force can develop internally. The internal messaging to nuclear operators has placed these individuals in a state of feeling non-important. Scandals in their career field have placed higher stress and doubt into some of the most valuable assets the Air Force has. The Air Force can stress the importance of nuclear operations and deterrence both internally and externally, resonating with a large group of individuals.

### **Anti-Access/Area Denial (Conflict in the Pacific)**

Historical familiarity increases the strength of narratives crafted around international terrorism and nuclear deterrence; however, these narratives fail to scope the contributions of the Air Force to emerging national security challenges. Emphasizing the Air Force's ability to project power into a denied environment will demonstrate the critical contributions of the Air Force to future threats to U.S. national security. Because this narrative is built around a vision of the future, the American public will be less aware of the underlying motivation. Successfully conveying this narrative to the American public requires the Air Force to convince the public of two facts. First, the Air Force must convince the American public that anti-access/area denial

(A2/AD) technologies threaten U.S. national and economic security. Second, the Air Force must convince the American public that the Air Force is critical to U.S. efforts to mitigate A2/AD.

An A2/AD technology seeks to deny nations access to global commons, such as air, sea, space and cyberspace (Watts, 2013). Examples of A2/AD technologies include anti-satellite weapons, anti-ship ballistic missiles, anti-aircraft artillery and missiles, cyber attacks and undersea mines. When applied to the global commons, A2/AD technologies pose significant threats to U.S. diplomatic, economic and military power. These capabilities can impede U.S. support to our allies, disrupt the sea-lanes vital to the global economy and threaten U.S. military power projection (Greenbert and Welsh, 2013). Conveying this threat successfully requires leveraging A2/AD applications that resonate with the American public. Examples such as the destruction of Malaysian Airline Flight 17 provide a tangible example of how these A2/AD capabilities can be employed. Convincing the American public that these capabilities pose a significant threat is only half of the challenge. The Air Force must do this while also detailing its role in mitigating these threats. This message speaks to the “Why” in the Air Force narrative: the Air Force allows the U.S. to protect global national security interests despite the proliferation of advanced technologies aimed at limiting military access to air, space and cyberspace. The “How” is built around Air Force core competencies: Global Strike, Air Superiority, Global ISR etc. The “What” includes the specific military capabilities the Air Force provides to counter these threats: stealth bombers, precision munitions, global satellite communications, remotely piloted aircraft, etc. This outline will allow the Air Force to move past historical challenges and emphasize its role in the emerging geopolitical environment.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the research presented above, the team makes two major recommendations to improve the Air Force's ability to tell its story to the American people. First, the Air Force must embrace an internally defined narrative that speaks to WHY the Air Force exists and connect it emotionally with the public by adopting a new motto framed in the WHY narrative. Second, the Air Force must publicize its stories by leveraging many different media outlets and other avenues in a fully integrated manner.

### **A New Air Force Narrative – Identifying the Air Force's "Why"**

In her paper on the different cultural narratives within the Air Force, Paula Thornhill (2012) seeks to identify a single, timeless narrative that underlies all others—what she calls an “origin story.” She proposes “Over Not Through” as this origin story. It speaks to the reasons the Air Force was created, and it represents the spirit of innovation that has characterized the Air Force throughout its history. However, at its core, “Over Not Through” still only embodies the “what” of the Air Force. It addresses why the Air Force initially came into being, but does not get at the key question of why the Air Force is relevant today.

As the Air Force develops its new narrative, it must begin by communicating to America the “why” of the Air Force. If the Air Force is going to reach the heart of the American public it must convey why it matters to them. Why does the Air Force exist?

We believe the Air Force exists because air, space and cyberspace capabilities are ideally suited to overcome the multitude of vexing geopolitical problems facing the United States of America today and tomorrow. The Air Force celebrates diversity of thought, ingenuity and imagination because these beget innovation. This innovation provides unique capabilities that

allow us to effect global change with immediacy. The Air Force answers the call to defend America's horizons.

We propose the following narrative to capture the Air Force's "why": Born of Necessity, Grown through Innovation, Eyes on the Horizon. This narrative is not fleeting; rather, it is enduring and permanent. Further, at its core, the narrative is not new at all: as Thornhill recommends, it encompasses and underlies each of the previous narratives and will endure into the future.

**“Born of Necessity, Grown through Innovation, Eyes on the Horizon” – The Air Force’s Timeless Narrative**

From the beginning of Air Force history, airpower has been used as a unique instrument of national policy. The stalemate of trench warfare during WWI was a costly game of attrition. “While the outcome of the Great War was decided primarily by horrible attrition on the ground and a strangling maritime blockade of Germany, airpower had shown its potential for autonomous offensive operations,” and the Army Air Corps developed to take full advantage of the gains that could be reached through Airpower (AF History, 2014).

Time and time again throughout the wars of the Twentieth Century, the Air Force saw a need that only it could meet, and it rose to meet that need admirably. This was particularly evident during World War II. Whether it was supplying Chinese forces in their struggle against the Imperial Japanese Army through the Hump Airlift (Hanson, 2007), the Doolittle Raid striking within the heart of Japan (Chun, 2006), or the easing of the Berlin Blockade through the Berlin Airlift (Hanson, 2007), the Air Force fulfilled missions and accomplished strategic and tactical objectives that no other service could achieve.

The Cold War period saw the Air Force develop its deterrent capabilities, effectively keeping the world from descending into another world war. By holding two parts of the nuclear triad, the Air Force was uniquely suited to strike anywhere on the globe at any time, thereby maintaining the balance of power in a time of great political uncertainty (Long, 2008). Airpower was used exclusively to compel Slobodan Milosevic to agree to NATO's demands during Operation Allied Force (Peters et al., 2001). In the period between the Gulf War and the return of ground troops to Iraq in 2003, only Airpower was capable of maintaining the status quo and protecting the peace through Operation Provide Comfort, Operation Northern Watch, and Operation Southern Watch (Byman and Waxman, 2000).

The Air Force continues to uniquely fill the needs of the American defense industry, particularly in the realm of space and cyberspace. Air Force advancement in the space realm, particularly in its development of ICBMs and subsequent spacelaunch vehicles, was "one of the great fundamental achievements of our age. It certainly made possible our space program." (Neufeld and Hall, 1998) The Air Force is still the preeminent service in regards to space and continues to operate, track, maintain, and control hundreds of satellites and space systems, and Air Force systems not only benefit the military but the civilian sector as well.

The Air Force has been, and continues to be, on the forefront of innovation. Airmen began as a corps of air-minded warriors who were determined to fight a vigilant enemy in a non-standard way: from the sky. The concept of air-to-air combat was still in an infant stage. For the first time, aircraft were being specifically developed for something more than just flight. Aircraft were designed to maneuver in relation to an enemy to allow the achievement of a position of advantage, thereby gaining the opportunity to destroy that enemy. An all-inclusive manual that would explain procedures and techniques for this type of combat had yet to be created. These

Airmen were able to show agile thinking and understand the positives and negatives of each split second decision they made. They used their ideas and experience to find new and more efficient ways in which they could maintain air superiority over their enemy (Rickenbacker, 2009). This same mindset has been the Air Force standard for more than 67 years. The Air Force uniquely encourages its youngest Airman to its oldest General to use their minds to find new and more efficient ways to accomplish the mission and take care of people.

The United States Air Force instills creativity into its Airmen by emphasizing the importance of four facets of knowledge that it deems most necessary: science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or better known as STEM. The emphasis placed upon these academic and research components encourages each Airman to continually find new and improved ways to execute daily operations to ensure mission success. An example of this is from a lecture delivered by Lt. Gen Robert R. Allardice, Air Mobility Command's Vice Commander, about a challenge that was presented to US forces in getting personnel into the northern section of Iraq during the invasion of 2003. Lt. Gen Allardice stated that, logistically, getting forces into this section of the country by land was impractical and by sea was impossible. The only possible solution was the largest airdrop since the invasion of Panama in 1989. It took the creative efforts of many Airmen in different locations to create a plan that would enable an effective and safe procedure to get Airmen on the ground. Lt. Gen Allardice indicated that the minds of the Airmen are what made this mission successful with his comment:

"The capabilities STEM-skilled Airmen brought to the fight enabled an armada to join in a single point in time," said Allardice. "Great American Airmen were studying the weather - science; using GPS and night-vision goggles - technology;

were able to operate in austere locations - engineering; and had planned over 140 possible routes - math" (O'Connell, 2012).

The collective efforts of these men and women were able to allow US forces to successfully work an executable solution to a challenging problem, all while using their diverse backgrounds and innovation as the fuel to the solution.

Even though the Air Force has been engaging in a war in which they have a vast technological advantage over their insurgent adversaries, innovation remains on the forefront of the Air Force agenda. The Air Force recently implemented a program called "Airmen Powered by Innovation" (API) to replace three existing "good idea" programs – the Innovative Development through Employee Awareness, Productivity Enhancing Capital Investment, and Best Practices Program (Douglas, 2014). The intent for API is to create a single source program that will allow innovative Airmen to submit their ideas for improvement. This will centralize the process and streamline creative ideas, thereby allowing the most promising ideas to be implemented sooner. Due to the limited resources inherent in an era of sequestration, it is imperative that the Air Force looks internally to find organic ways in which it can mitigate excessive spending and waste. Those Airmen, who are actively executing their tasks on a daily basis, have the most fundamental role in guaranteeing that the Air Force is properly capitalizing on the processes and technology that can be upgraded to increase efficiency. The Air Force must depend on its Airmen to not only improve processes, but also to create the ideas that lead to technological advancements in airframes, weapons, and cyberspace.

The Air Force continually looks into the future, predicting changes in the nature of warfare and developing its technologies and tactics to anticipate those changes. This has been an emphasis of the Air Force since its inception, with General of the Air Force Henry "Hap" Arnold

believing that “any Air Force which does not keep its doctrines ahead of its equipment, and its vision far into the future, can only delude the nation into a false sense of security” (America’s Air Force: Call to the Future, 2014).

“The Air Force’s ability to continue to adapt and respond faster than our potential adversaries is the greatest challenge we face over the next 30 years” (America’s Air Force: A Call to the Future, 2014). This statement from the Air Force strategy document *America’s Air Force: A Call to the Future* demonstrates the key roles that innovation and adaptation play in ensuring the Air Force’s future dominance. Airmen will continue to play a key role in that innovation. “An effective weapon system in the hands of innovative Airmen is incredibly powerful. Those who operate the systems in the field continue to discover uses that designers never imagined” (America’s Air Force: A Call to the Future, 2014). Airmen, and the Air Force, will continue to look into the future to predict changes in the nature of warfare, and will use their innovative mindset to react to those predicted changes to successfully navigate all future strategic landscapes. “Success in the combat environment of the future will still demand ingenuity and imagination as it has in the past—perhaps even more so” (America’s Air Force: A Call to the Future, 2014).

Having identified the Air Force’s “why,” we can now build outward, in the order that Sinek recommends, to the “how” and “what.” We propose that the Air Force’s current vision and core missions fit nicely into this construct:

*WHY: Born of Necessity, Grown through Innovation, Eyes on the Horizon*

*HOW: The USAF develops, fields, sustains and employs cutting-edge military technologies that provide Global Vigilance, Global Reach and Global Power.*

*WHAT: The USAF does this through its core missions of (1) air and space superiority; (2) intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; (3) rapid global mobility; (4) global strike and (5) command and control.*

### **“Defending America’s Horizons”: An Enduring Slogan for the Air Force**

The narrative proposed above captures the Air Force’s “why” and provides an excellent foundation upon which to begin building emotional connections with the American people. However, “Born of Necessity, Grown through Innovation, Eyes on the Horizon” is too long to be an effective tagline for Air Force advertising. Therefore, we propose that the Air Force distill this narrative into a new motto that can be used to shape both internal and external messaging.

In the Air Force’s 67 year history, it has adopted many mottos. Recent ones have included: “Aim High...Fly-Fight-Win,” “Cross into the Blue,” “Do Something Amazing,” and “We’ve Been Waiting For You.” Mottos are meant to be short, effective, and memorable. They quickly inform consumers about what the company has to offer and what the company is about and they develop mottos that last for years, if not decades. In the Air Force, the past mottos have met the standards of short, effective, and memorable, but unfortunately, the Air Force motto seems to change very frequently, which has left many Airmen with “motto fatigue.”

Additionally, the current Air Force motto of “Aim High” is insufficient in terms of how it tells the story of the Air Force and how it operates in today’s environment (Kohli et al, 2007). Most importantly, none of the mottos in the past have described the “WHY” of the Air Force.

Therefore, the Air Force must change its motto and the narrative it tells the American public one final time, this time ensuring the narrative is enduring and all encompassing. Since the service’s inception, the Air Force has been known for its technologies, its innovation in terms of both technology and tactics, and the continual ability of the Air Force to predict and adapt to the

changing nature of war through its innovation. This aspect is integral to the Air Force and the motto must in turn reflect this unique ability. The motto the Air Force should adopt is “Defending America’s Horizons.”

“Defending America’s Horizons” speaks to the unique mission of the Air Force and the innovation inherent in the Air Force’s identity. The Air Force is both the nation’s defense and offense. It defends our skies and population and can strike anywhere in the world at a moment’s notice. The reference to the horizon has multiple meanings. The first signifies how the Air Force protects the United States from afar; the horizon is a distant place and serves as a bubble of America’s defense zone. The Air Force defends against threats far before they reach American shores. This horizon is not just physical but also temporal; the horizon represents the future. The Air Force has its focus on the horizon; it is looking towards the future to find new ways to accomplish the mission. The Air Force relies on its innovation from within the service to defend the nation and be the premier branch within the Department of Defense. This motto can be sold to all demographics within the American public. It does not depend on the educational background, age, or financial background of the person hearing the motto. As the best stewards of the Air Force’s innovation and technological advancements, Airmen can rally behind the meaning of the motto and sell it to the American public. This motto, and the way in which it reflects and advertises the enduring identity and narrative of the United States Air Force, will cement the Air Force’s purpose and importance in the minds of the American people.

### **The Necessary Multi-Pronged Media Approach**

In order for the public to embrace the new motto, and more importantly embrace the Air Force, the narrative must be shared with the public. This should be accomplished with a concerted media effort. The following are several domains in which the Air Force will operate

to share its narrative with the American public. While the Air Force has used most of these media in the past, the way in which our media strategy differs from current strategy is the synergistic way in which we plan to bring these methods together. The fusion of all of these methods will lead to a greater resonance of our narrative with the American public.

### **Television and Film**

Several different types of visual media have been used by the United States military, most notably television and film. Television has been a primary source of information for Americans since its inception. What the American public sees or does not see shapes their opinions of the military, and the Air Force's daily operations and impacts have not had the same attention as those of ground forces since 2001. Unfortunately, a truth about media is "that the media will report on death and failure before life and successes" (Burns, 2006). A large conventional war with a substantial air campaign may put Airpower at the forefront, but future insurgencies and failed state concerns may keep the successes of the Air Force from media's headlines.

As it has done for many years, the Air Force should continue to use television advertisements to get its story out. Moving forward, though, the Air Force should seek to develop an advertising campaign with a simple, consistent message that is relayed through a unique, attention-grabbing commercial. This commercial should be no more than fifteen-seconds in length with three main points or fewer. Furthermore, these commercials should not focus on what we do but tie into the emotional why of the public. As the commercials air, the Air Force needs to pre-load the commercials onto its website and social media sites such as YouTube. It should also work on search engine optimization to aid individuals in finding the clips. For example, it took our team, with each of us searching independently, over five minutes

to find General Welsh's new ad. In contrast, it took us less than thirty seconds to find a Nike ad we wanted to use as an example.

Beyond advertising, television also offers opportunities to tell history in interesting and exciting ways. A certain type of program, the docudrama, can be seen as a combination of a documentary and a drama whereby historical events are dramatically reenacted; this type television program could be useful for the purpose of telling the Air Force narrative. Unlike a simple narrated historical program, the docudrama can bring past and present Airmen and key Airpower events to life, affecting a wider audience with more emotion. However, remaining truthful and honest is critical, and this method must be seamlessly integrated and consistent with other methods to present an effective narrative.

The portrayal of the Air Force in feature films played its most significant role in public opinion during WWII. In the lead up to the war, Hollywood recognized how vital it was to promote American military strength and foster public opinion, because "if America entered the war, it would be total war for survival not a mere conflict" (Osborne, 1990). Yet, there were still dissenters that saw Hollywood's involvement as "warmongering," and forced congressional hearings to investigate the motives of filmmakers (Osborne, 1990). However, Pearl Harbor ended this dissention as it became clear that America was involved in total war. The remainder of WWII saw an environment in which military films were produced with close cooperation between the government and the motion picture industry.

Following WWII, particularly during the Korean War, military films were never a favorite for producers, largely due to the lack of full American public support resulting from questions of American involvement and the issues surrounding the war (Osborne, 1990, p. 30). Then, the Vietnam era saw films become more anti-war, as the American public was tired of a

protracted war, and concerns with internal issues abounded (Osborne, 1990). Today's environment, with a combination of protracted conflicts, domestic issues, a lack of a unified enemy, and future threats of near-peer adversaries, insurgencies, and failed states does not suggest that a Hollywood-produced feature film would be as attractive to, or create the impact on, the American public as in past scenarios. The current portrayal of Air Force technologies embedded within a larger film framework will likely continue, perhaps sparking some interest in the Air Force for recruiting purposes, but not effectively telling the Air Force narrative.

While a Hollywood feature film would fail to adequately tell the Air Force's narrative in a way that would resonate with Americans, the documentary film may be a viable option. The documentary provides a means to inform, educate, and tell a story in a meaningful, relatable way. In particular, documentaries are able to act "as a way to explore multiple perspectives and as a way to teach about controversial issues." (Marcus and Stoddard, 2009, p. 279) Seeing as today's military use and involvement is both reliant on multiple perspectives and controversial, the documentary is an avenue to tell the Air Force narrative from an Airman's perspective. Furthermore, documentaries are "often perceived as trustworthy when compared to their feature film counterparts because they more closely resemble written history in form and narrative." (Marcus and Stoddard, 2009, p. 280) An effective documentary would illustrate historical examples where Airpower and Airmen were needed, how innovation met or exceeded said need, and then how forward-thinking Airmen continued to progress, create, and innovate. This would lend credence to the historical part of the Air Force narrative, then the film would turn to the current needs or threats that only the Air Force can fulfill or defeat, and finally it would show the current Airmen and their innovative minds that secure America's future. They would span the whole of the Air Force's capabilities, focusing on the force in its entirety, rather than focusing on

specific career fields the way past documentaries have. The film should also be steadfast in telling the truth, whether good or bad, in order to be transparent and effectively portray the human side that makes Airmen great. This avenue should also emphasize how the Air Force is, and will continue to be, necessary to national defense, showcasing Airpower's unique abilities.

### **Print Media**

An underused method that can be adopted to sell the mission of the Air Force and highlight the innovation of the Airmen is print media, specifically books. When the Air Force was in its infancy, books on Airpower and the Air Force were published frequently; 1944 saw a peak of aviation and airpower in books (Vick, 2014). Since that time, the percentage of books related to airpower and aviation has declined significantly. The two most popular decades for books written by senior Air Force leaders were the 1940s and 1960s (Vick, 2014), the times in which the Air Force popularity was extremely high. These statistics show a correlation between public opinion of the Air Force and the number of books written regarding airpower.

Writing and storytelling should also be encouraged throughout the entire Air Force, including even junior Airmen. One such way to facilitate this increased publication in the Air Force is to have a force-wide short story competition. Airmen should be given the opportunity to write a short story chronicling their service, about how they have been innovators, and why the Air Force is the most important military branch. They should be encouraged to draw on their operational experiences, their education and technical background, and their strategic viewpoints on where the Air Force must go in the future. From these submissions, a group of these short stories will be published and available in bookstores throughout the nation. This competition will benefit not only the American public, but also the Airmen that participate. The American public will see the innovation of those in the Air Force and the technological advances the Air

Force has made. From the Airmen's side, they will develop a better understanding of where they fit within the overall Air Force mission. To supplement this competition, the Air Force should develop a policy where every Chief of Staff and Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force contributes a story. This would encourage senior Air Force leaders to share their stories and experiences with the public, encouraging a culture of writing in the Air Force that will bolster public opinion.

### **Interactive Media**

The world is becoming increasingly technical, interconnected, and digital. Mobile devices and the applications (apps) they offer have grown increasingly popular and profitable in recent years. These apps are not only available for mobile phones, but they are now being tailored to tablets and televisions as well (Lessin and Ante, 2013). Similarly, few things capture the imagination of today's youth like video games, and few adults are unaffected by these games through their exposure to their children, grandchildren, and popular culture. According to a study by the Entertainment Software Association, 58% of Americans play video games (Entertainment Software Association, 2013).

Ian Bogost, in his book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, makes a case for using interactive software like an app or a video game to inform the public about the USAF mission:

“Videogames are an expressive medium. They represent how real and imagined systems work. They invite players to interact with those systems and form judgments about them. As part of the ongoing process of understanding this medium and pushing it further as players, developers, and critics, we must strive

to understand how to construct and critique the representations of our world in videogame form.” (Bogost, 2010, p. 44-46)

This medium provides an opportunity for a well designed and marketed game that could cement the Air Force Core Values and demonstrate the diversity in personnel, competencies and equipment required to effectively defend the nation using air, space and cyberspace.

Jane McGonigal, in her book *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*, claims that some existing video games are “designed to help ordinary people achieve the world’s most urgent goals: curing cancer, stopping climate change, spreading peace, ending poverty... new participation platforms and collaboration environments are making it possible for anyone to help invent a better future, just by playing a game.” (McGonigal, 2011, p. 332-334)

The Army developed and released a game in mid-2004 called *America’s Army* as a recruiting tool. The game has been updated over the years and is an overt attempt at recruiting and glorifying the tactical first person shooter aspect of Army life. It can be downloaded for free and takes advantage of existing gaming engines. Users are periodically prompted to inquire further about Army careers in order to continue playing the game, but that hasn’t influenced its success and it was honored in the Guinness Book of World Records for “Most Downloaded War Game” in 2009 (Glenday, 2009).

The Air Force can, and should, take advantage of the medium of interactive media to appeal to the American public. This could begin as an app, which would have lower costs and a faster development time, but could be developed into a follow on video game to maximize audience and take advantage of the increased capabilities of video games. Many flight simulators of the recent past have given a glimpse into the capabilities of past and current USAF aircraft,

but this proposed game would be much more than a flight simulator. While it would incorporate some of the expected flight simulator and first person aspects one would expect in a modern video game, the game would encompass as many aspects of contemporary airmanship as practical. Much like reality, the game would include challenges that would demonstrate the critical thinking and problem-solving skills the Air Force demands of its Airmen, present and future. Examples include puzzle and riddle style games, as well as strategy games that could include most major Air Force Specialty Codes as well as enlisted and officer positions.

The game could follow a number of different formats. A first person adventure could take an Airman from the inception of airpower over 100 years ago through the modern age engaging in the many different facets of the Air Force's capabilities as it switches between many different "personalities" as many modern games do. It could also begin at any time in the continuum. Different "missions" could be chosen that replicate those of the Air Force's most revered heroes, from Bong to Levitow to Sijan to Olds. Heritage could be reinforced while showcasing current capabilities, thereby spreading the Air Force narrative and touting the necessity of Airpower.

### **Online Marketing**

The expanded use of the Internet over the past decade has created a new and influential marketing space. While online marketing has been around for thirty years, changing Internet behavior has caused a recent shift in marketing techniques. Two of the most successful online marketing methods are social media and native advertising. By utilizing these successful marketing techniques, the Air Force can better use the rapidly growing and expanding medium of the Internet to deliver its narrative and influence public opinion.

Internet advertising has been around since the early 1990s, but its effectiveness has skyrocketed in the last decade. In 2012, it was estimated that there were 1.2 billion Internet users

worldwide, with 87% of Americans actively online (Wilson, 2013). Access to the majority of the population is not enough, though. Traditional online marketing ads, such as popups and banners, are becoming less and less effective. Banner ad click through rates have dropped from 9% in 2000 to just 0.2% in 2012 (Wasserman, 2012). This means that the average Internet user will only pay attention, and respond, to 1 in 500 advertisements. To combat this desensitization, new techniques have been developed by marketers.

Social media is a broad term for websites that allow users to create, view, and share their own content. This includes everything from uploading videos to YouTube, creating profiles on Facebook and LinkedIn, and sharing ideas and thoughts on Twitter. Marketing companies have partnered with social media providers, like Facebook and Google, and are now able to characterize individuals by their Internet history, personal data, and uploaded media. This information is then used by marketers to present tailored ads to that user. Two different users can be presented with two completely different advertising strategies even if they go to the exact same website. Marketers can choose to have certain ads be shown only to certain demographics; for example, only showing alcohol ads to users that are older than 21. This targeting of advertisements focuses the marketing efforts on the ideal demographics, increasing the effectiveness of the message.

Another facet to social media is it allows users to participate with a company or organization's marketing efforts. If an organization has social media accounts created, like a Facebook page or a Twitter account, they can put out instant updates and messages to their followers. If the message is well-received, the recipient can then resend it to their friends and family, further disseminating the message. This cost-effective "viral" marketing strategy can be highly effective if done correctly.

Social media marketing is ideal for disseminating short messages and pictures, but native advertising is the best method for presenting media that can change public opinion. Native advertising is a term for marketing content that is presented to a user without being expressly formatted as an advertisement. In particular, companies and organizations are now sponsoring articles on news websites, sometimes even written by the news staff themselves. The only detail that identifies the article as an advertisement is usually a small message near the top of the article that reads “Sponsored Content.” This method, if done correctly, actually adds to the user’s experience while presenting them with a structured message from the sponsor. Examples of recent native advertising are “9 ways cleaning has become smarter” sponsored by Swiffer on Buzzfeed.com (Buzzfeed, 2013) and “Will millennials ever completely shun the office?” sponsored by Dell, written by a New York Times journalist, and featured on nytimes.com (Anderson, 2014). In telling the “Air Force story”, the Air Force could sponsor such content as well. Such stories could include an article on how GPS enables businesses, how World War III was prevented by Strategic Air Command, or how the Air Force supported Haiti after its devastating earthquake. The Air Force is writing similar articles on af.mil, but native advertising would provide a larger forum for greater access and a more effective means for advocating the Air Force.

Just as a successful air campaign involves coordination between all of the air assets, successful online media campaigns need to be in sync with their products as well. While the Air Force is active in online media, it seems that the public affairs efforts online so far have been uncoordinated. Ideally, the Air Force could partner with an online marketing consultation firm to craft an effective online marketing campaign. Many Fortune 500 companies work with a consultation firm to ensure that their message is being handled correctly. The Air Force doesn’t

train its members in media strategy, whereas marketing consultants are well trained and well equipped to effectively manage online media strategies. Social media, traditional online ads, and native advertising are powerful tools and must be developed in support of a common message – in this case increasing the public's view of the Air Force as the preeminent military branch. A successful social media strategy is one where every message and update is in support of a specific initiative, constantly reinforcing that larger argument with each small message. Furthermore, the Air Force must leverage social media to spread the word about all the other facets of this media campaign, thereby creating a synergistic effect and connecting the various markets into one cohesive strategy.

As an example of a successful social media approach, Nike utilized a five-minute inspirational video related to the World Cup as a means of advertising. Beyond the product placement, Nike's name did not appear until the end of the video. This video was also shared on YouTube, Facebook and multiple other social media avenues. Nike relied completely on individuals sharing the video with friends to spread the message. The message, however, focused on the emotional why factor of the World Cup and its athletes. It was clear, non-corporate, and inspired the public. The Air Force should use its social networking to promote short films about why the Air Force is important, connecting to the emotional side of individuals and avoiding a canned structure of relaying information.

### **Bottom-Up Campaigns**

The Air Force narrative is inherently a message that comes from within the service, which suggests it should take hold and grow from within, at the grassroots level. While the previously suggested approaches to reaching demographics across the American public are strong and likely to have an impact, they are by design a top-down approach. Therefore, another

key aspect of the multi-pronged media blitz is to create a grassroots campaign, to effect a change in perceptions both within and without the Air Force, from the bottom-up. In a day when media and news is all around, a word on a subject from a close friend or trusted advisor can make all the difference to an individual. That close friend's impression about the Air Force's preeminence is exactly what is hoped to be achieved through this campaign. Using the following methods, we would hope to create just such a cultural shift in the American public's beliefs on what is contributed by, and what is unique to, the Air Force.

### **Air Force Discussion Groups**

The way to start off this grassroots campaign is to harness the power and insight of the hardworking, intelligent and initiative-taking Airmen at bases around the globe. The Air Force should utilize the concept of think tanks and focus groups wherein small groups of people come together to tackle a particular problem or issue. These extra-curricular groups would be much like the intellectual groups that people like former presidents William H. Taft and Theodore Roosevelt joined growing up, where the group would read books, share ideas, and discuss issues of the day (Goodwin, 2013). In these kinds of social interactions, issues like Air Force public perception could be brought up, and discussions and research could be conducted in a free-spirited approach to learning that would help bring out ideas. Group members could be vectored onto a specific topic by senior leaders, and then be allowed to come up with solutions and methods for increasing public opinion in their local or regional area. The benefits of this would be two fold. First, it would help raise awareness of the issue of public perception in the Air Force itself, and would help educate Airmen about what it is they do on a grand scale, and why what they do on the small scale matters. Secondly, it would allow those Airmen to spread the Air Force story to others in the civilian world, letting people hear about the preeminence of the Air

Force from a trusted group of friends, neighbors and family members. The biggest challenge faced by these groups would be for group leaders to ensure that thoughts and academic studies of Air Force level problems were translated into action. Research has shown that these types of groups can be a powerful force for change, but only if they move past the thinking stage and into the action stage (Kezar et al., 2011, p. 139). Techniques that could be encouraged are speaking at schools, wearing uniforms off base and when on official travel, engaging with the public about why you are wearing the uniform, talking with friends and family about what you do, being involved with local and state governments, interacting with local businesses, encouraging Airmen to know how their jobs tie into the overall Air Force mission, and why they can speak proudly about being an Airmen and a warrior.

As a corollary to these think tank groups, members should be encouraged to grow the group with high-speed individuals through active recruitment and mentoring. In the world of universities and higher education, this strategy of mentoring students and hiring like-minded individuals is used heavily in creating change initiatives. Professors without much authoritative power will start student groups and mentor those students on the issues of the day, and how to pursue making a change. Additionally, professors looking for a change often seek to be placed on hiring boards, which then allows them to recruit professors that have similar views on the topic at hand. This allows them to grow the voice of their group and harness the collective action of many people in order to make a change (Kezar et al., 2011, p. 142-143). This same concept, proven to be effective in academia grassroots campaigns, could be used by the previously discussed think tank and Air Force professional development groups. Those involved in the groups could identify “high speed” individuals with a penchant for making a difference and then actively recruit them into the organization, getting them impassioned and mentoring them in how

to go about telling the Air Force story. This would grow the group, allowing it to become one that consistently replenished itself as people changed stations, which would allow for continuity and a continuum of effort in telling the Air Force story.

### **Air Force Identity Education and Cross-Talk**

Another way in which a grassroots campaign could be effective in getting the Air Force narrative out to the public would be through more professional education opportunities for Airmen. Often Airmen feel that they lack a common identity, instead identifying themselves by their specialty or job. This leads to Airmen only seeing their small piece of the Air Force, only understanding what they do on a day to day basis, and thereby missing the impact of the service as a whole. By increasing career field cross-talk at the junior level, by providing education that allows for the lowest ranks to understand the Air Force mission, how what they do ties into it, and how it creates new technologies or ensures the safety of our nation, Airmen will be better able to talk intelligently and positively about the service. A great example of this cross-talk opportunity is the experience Company Grade Officers (CGOs) have at Squadron Officer School (SOS). SOS provides an excellent opportunity to learn what other people in the Air Force do, how each person contributes, and how each person is necessary and interconnected in making the mission happen. A CGO's view of the Air Force is magnified by this cross talk, and is then better able to advocate for the Air Force. This professional development needs to happen continually at all levels of the Air Force, and with greater frequency (Kezar et al., 2011, p. 139).

### **External Partnerships**

The next thing the Air Force can do at a higher organizational level in this grassroots campaign is to partner with existing external networks. One of the greatest inhibitors of telling the Air Force story is classification levels, and the inability to talk about precisely what we do,

and can do, because of security concerns. However, there are other organizations that are also working to convey a message with these same concerns and may have lessons learned or a shared message the Air Force can take advantage of. Two great examples of such organizations are Boeing and Lockheed Martin. Both of these defense contractors air commercials and print ads in order to increase the public's opinion of them and to garner public support, despite the fact that both companies deal with highly classified technical data and projects, and despite having no product that is sold directly to individual consumers. If the Air Force joined forces with its contractors and industrial base, a joint story putting forth history, innovations, capabilities and future directions could be put out on a larger scale, reaching more audiences and demographics than any single organization could alone. Additionally, this kind of combined campaign could allow for best practices and knowledge sharing in terms of marketing and reaching demographics, which would allow for impressions to be increased, and the Air Force story to be told more effectively (Kezar et al., 2011, p. 145).

Additionally, the Air Force should partner with key external stakeholders like politicians and lobbying organizations and enlist their help in increasing the public opinion of the Air Force. Two great examples of such organizations would be the Air Force Association and the Reserve Officers Association. By increasing information provided to these organizations, which inherently have more freedom to interact with political powerhouses, push agendas, and lobby, the Air Force could grow its voice to the audiences that make decisions that carry a large strategic impact, and increase the Air Force's stature and importance in the minds of the individuals that make decisions that affect the Air Force service wide (Kezar et al., 2011, p. 146).

Throughout this grassroots campaign, the Air Force should use data to tell its story. This would be most important with the more educated demographics and key stake holders, but

having hard numbers to convince the public of the importance of the Air Force and its need for resources is key. Numbers that show our capabilities should be espoused, like the accuracy of precision weapons and the numbers of weapons/sorties employed in previous conflicts. The numbers of lives saved per mission and the number of terrorists killed would speak to our successes and relevance in the current war on terror. Additionally, the public should understand why resources we need are important, and we should push how many aircraft we need, how many satellites we need, and how much these all cost. By breaking down the numbers for people throughout the other parts of the grassroots campaign, the Air Force will allow people to come to the conclusion of why we are so important and need to be supported on their own, which will give credence to our message (Kezar et al., 2011, p. 145).

### **Global Network of Knowledge Sharing**

Finally, in this grassroots initiative, there needs to be a unity of action and sharing of knowledge across the Air Force. Therefore, a website, forum or some kind of community of practice needs to be formed to allow the dispersed groups to virtually get together and share ideas. Such a website could present the topics to be addressed and then forums could be used to report on successes and failures and to share ideas between unit level groups. This sharing of ideas would allow all those involved to take advantage of other peoples' experiences and thoughts, allowing for significant diversity and growth in terms of activities pursued in pushing the Air Force story. Such a virtual meeting place would be the link that holds the grassroots initiative together and keeps all the separate entities working towards the same goal (Pepper and Bender, 2013, p. 5).

## **Champion Current Air Force Heroes and Spokesmen**

One of the advantages that the Army Air Corps and later the Air Force had in the early 20th century was the high visibility of Airmen (Vick, 2014). That period of the Air Force's history gave way to heroes of airpower such as Billy Mitchell, Eddie Rickenbacker, Jimmy Doolittle and the Tuskegee Airmen. Airpower came alive to the public through articles, stories and books written about and by these men. Successfully conveying the Air Force story must rely on championing current Air Force heroes that will make the uniqueness of the Air Force come alive for the American public. Ideally these heroes would be specific people with stories that the public can latch on to and identify with. The Air Force currently has "Portraits in Courage" but these Airmen are not regularly seen on a public forum. Military members who are familiar with the sacrifices these members make have seen their stories, now the Air Force needs to share these stories with the public. Additionally, the Air Force should look towards utilizing a non-military spokesman. Many of the initial champions for airpower were non-military members who were viewed as experts in their field and could rally support from civilians. Figures such as Richard Branson, Elon Musk are aviation and space figureheads. Even using a former Airman like Chuck Norris could spur interest in the American public. The challenge for the Air Force will be to make the relationship beneficial for both parties. Nike drove home their ability to incentivize becoming a Nike spokesman. The Air Force cannot pay members to speak for them as Nike did, but a dedicated spokesmen, Airmen or warrior with the right motivation and placed in the public's view will drive home the reality of the mission. Without those stories it will be difficult to reach and capture the hearts of the American public.

## **The Best Defense is a Good Offense**

The Air Force has built a culture focused on innovation and developing intelligent and skilled individuals. “The world’s great Air Force, powered by Airmen and fueled by innovation” is not just a slogan, it’s a cultural identifier that drives how the Air Force trains, operates and develops personnel. However, this unique aspect of intellect and innovation is not readily seen on television and in the media due to the defensive posture the Air Force has had to take with recent scandals. A simple Google News search of the term “Air Force” reveals mainly articles about sexual assault, suicide, death and failed projects. The best defense is a good offense suggests an organization or team that is on the attack, which will prevent being attacked. Essentially, the opponent has to defend assertions or allegations to such an extent that they are unable to effectively attack the organization. While the Air Force cannot brush aside serious issues, it can take an offensive stance in the media, socially and during any opportunity that senior leaders are given to promote the organization. This recommendation relies on Air Force Public Affairs to seek out more opportunities, not associated with scandals, for leaders to be interviewed and identify heroes to explain why the Air Force exists, why it’s important and why the American public depends on the service.

## **Treat Media Engagement Like an Air Campaign – Create a Media Operations Center**

The Air Force has achieved unparalleled success in combat operations by integrating and coordinating its efforts through an Air Operations Center. We propose the Air Force do the same in its approach to media engagement by creating a central Media Operations Center to coordinate all public outreach efforts across the entire service. This will improve the Air Force’s ability to push central message in all of its media activities. The Media Operations Center would also facilitate decentralized execution of public engagement, enabling the service to best put its

abundance of innovative Airmen to work on the problem of improving public perception. Finally, the Media Operations Center would help to break down the Air Force's Public Affairs and Recruiting stovepipes, leading to a fully integrated effort in all external communications.

### **Conclusion**

Airpower has been the dominant method of warfare ever since intrepid Airmen discovered that the airplane could be used to save lives and win wars. Airpower, and in this context space and cyberspace power, continues and will continue to be the most significant method of warfare. Further, the United States Air Force is the greatest Air Force the world has ever seen, but this was no accident. The innovative, forward-thinking nature of Airmen has kept the Air Force one step ahead of other services and other nations in terms of concepts, technology, and unmatched capabilities, securing America's national defense for decades and "Defending America's Horizons." However, the Air Force must aggressively pursue a fused, multi-pronged, integrated campaign to share the Air Force narrative with the public, showing how the Air Force has, and always will, create new concepts and technologies for future needs, grow and develop through the innovation of Airmen, and look to new horizons for America's future.

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