

# Charting a Strategic Course in Interesting Times

*May you live in interesting times.*

—Chinese proverb (and curse)

We live in an era of strategically dislocating events. On national and international levels, faith in the global economic system has been shaken to the point that even some of the free market's most ardent advocates have supported government intervention to restore faith and confidence in the system. For today's Airmen, times are similarly interesting—at seemingly every turn, challenges have appeared to long-held, previously irrefutable beliefs in the goodness of airpower and how best to employ its capabilities in the joint fight. While individually each challenge may seem somewhat tactical in nature, combined they suggest the US Air Force is at a strategic inflection point. A few examples of the airpower axioms under fire include:

- “Centralized control, decentralized execution,” a basic tenet of Air Force doctrine, faces withering fire from some military leaders who have been vocal in extolling the virtues of decentralization, particularly in irregular warfare (IW). For in IW, the distinctions—which at their essence reflect the reality that ground commanders tend to conduct scalable, bottom-up planning, whereas air components conduct planning at the operational level (e.g., at a combined air operations center), with mission planning and execution details done at lower, tactical levels—become glaringly obvious. This disconnect has led to a perception, on the one hand, of distance and lack of commitment, and on the other hand resentment at being viewed as merely an afterthought and supporting arm.
- “Effects-based approach to operations (EBAO),” an organizing principle for planning within the combined air operations center, has been essentially declared null and void in one of our key unified commands. Admittedly, the notion of “beginning with the end in mind” had been pushed in some circles to a form of science in which warfare could be perhaps viewed as a battle of mathematical formulae. But tarring all forms of EBAO with the same brush risks “throwing out

the baby with the bathwater,” at least from the viewpoint of many Airmen.

- Once the gold standard for nuclear surety, concerns have been raised about the USAF commitment to the nuclear operations business. Of note, these concerns were cited as the proximate cause for another strategically dislocating event, the simultaneous removal of the two most senior officials in the Department of the Air Force. Addressing shortcomings highlighted in various reports following the Minot and Taiwan incidents will require focus, resources, and time . . . each of which is in critically short supply.
- Despite demonstrating adaptability and flexibility across the spectrum of warfare, critics question the Air Force’s efficacy in and commitment to a future awash in irregular warfare. Airpower provides (as articulated in, among other places, AFDD 2-3, *Irregular Warfare*) an asymmetric capability for the joint force commander—our IW adversaries can battle us on the ground but are continually vulnerable to the effects that airpower can bring to bear. These adversaries have learned that the most effective counters to the advantages that our superiority in the air provides are to violate laws of armed conflict by hiding among the population and exploiting media coverage of collateral damage—both actual and contrived—attacking not our ability but our willingness to use the asymmetric capabilities that airpower brings to the fight.

The list goes on, but this suffices to provide a few examples without engaging in an exercise in self-flagellation. This too shall pass—but only with the right vision and leadership. In times like these even Airmen may need an occasional reminder of the inherent greatness in what our Air Force provides for the Department of Defense and the nation. There is a passage in Tom Ricks’ *Fiasco* in which senior US civilian leaders express incredulity that it would take a larger ground force to control a population than the force required to defeat its land forces. A large part of that answer should have been obvious—airpower, which can attack an adversary simultaneously at its tactical, operational, and strategic levels, enabled the decisive defeat of the Iraqi military despite our ground forces being numerically outnumbered.

In the end, the occasional scrutiny of “axioms of airpower” can be healthy to ensure our tenets do not become empty bumper stickers. At Air University we are proud to provide a variety of forums encouraging just such an expansion of our intellectual perspectives. These include: Symposia, *Blue Darts* (op-eds), *The Wright Stuff*, *Air and Space Power Journal* (available in six languages), and *Strategic Studies Quarterly*.

In this edition of *SSQ*, I especially commend to you Gen (ret) John Shaud’s article entitled “*In Service to the Nation . . . Air Force Research Institute Strategic Concept for 2018–2023.*” General Shaud addresses many of the strategically dislocating constructs I have mentioned in this short editorial. While it is likely no one will agree with all of the article’s points, it (and the study from which it is excerpted) provides elements of a solid strategic vision for navigating from our Air Force’s present position, through interesting times, into the uncertain future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Allen G. Peck', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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