Letter to Editor

The Contact Sport Senior Leaders Must Play (Spring 2009)

Maj Gen Charles J. Dunlap Jr. is to be commended for his recent editorial in *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, which urged Airmen—and especially senior Air Force officers—to contribute more regularly to the public debate on national security issues and defense policy. As General Dunlap argued, too often the "air-minded" perspective has been missing from professional journals and other important public venues. Why has this been the case, and what can be done to remedy the deficit?

While, ironically, the Air Force prides itself on being the service with a truly global perspective, too often Airmen have interpreted that narrowly in terms of platforms and capabilities and not in terms of a wider appreciation for global security issues and how airpower can best be employed by civilian policy makers. Of course, this is not entirely surprising in light of the technological foundations of airpower (and also space and cyberspace power). Nor is it unexpected when considering that the USAF was born in tandem with the belief that airpower alone could win wars, along with the perception that too often it has been civilian policy makers who have stymied airpower's promise—witness the enduring bitterness over the use of airpower during the Vietnam War, or even during NATO air operations in Kosovo.

From my viewpoint as past student and current educator within Air University's graduate-level professional military education (PME) system, a key contributing factor is that we have not been educating our officers soon enough, or broadly enough, about the US national security policy-making system in all its complexity and messy political reality. Of course, realistically, faculty can only accomplish so much within the PME system, with its many competing joint and service requirements. A partial remedy for that is to send more of our brightest officers to prestigious civilian universities early in their careers to receive graduate degrees in such disciplines as political science, international relations, area studies, and history. Just as we believe that the networking and cross-dialogue that occurs at PME schools is a key benefit for our officers, so too is the networking with potential civilian policy makers and the exposure to diverse civilian perspectives that they would receive at universities. In that setting our future leaders can nurture broader habits of thinking, as they will doubtless be forced out of their comfort zone at times and may even be placed on the defensive. That is all to the good, as nothing is guaranteed to stimulate creative thinking more than a policy "dogfight" with a worthy adversary. In this way we can help ensure that some of our key officers are targeted early to articulate airpower successfully in the national security arena.

A further important factor contributing to the lack of effective public advocacy by senior USAF leaders is that many of our officers do not seem to understand how to provide professional military advice in line with appropriate civil-military relations. This was brought home most forcefully in the summer of 2008 when the secretary of defense relieved both the secretary and the chief of staff of the Air Force of their

duties. While certainly the nuclear stewardship issue was the precipitating cause, many commentators have pointed to a perception within Congress and other policy-making circles that the Air Force refused (or was unable) to read the political signs correctly when it continued to insist on acquiring larger numbers of F-22s and did not fully grasp the displeasure felt over such USAF acquisition processes as a new tanker.

From my perspective as a faculty member, at least part of recent Air Force problems lies in the fact that we are not systematically educating our officers to understand the boundaries of their advisory roles in the civil-military relationship and how that enters into national security policy debates. This is a very complex and easily politicized arena, and it is important that we challenge our future leaders to prepare to operate within it from an early stage. Yet here is where I must respectfully disagree with General Dunlap's use of Gen Colin Powell and Gen David Petraeus as proper exemplars for military officers engaging in public debate on defense policy. General Dunlap points to specific instances where both of these general officers published opinion pieces in influential newspapers, which turned out to be controversial, or even political, as they intruded into what was perceived to be the civilian policy makers' spheres. While General Dunlap rightly applauds the ensuing policy discussions, he also emphasizes that both officers' careers were not negatively affected, and that then-Lieutenant General Petraeus was afterwards promoted. Perhaps General Dunlap did not mean to give the impression that he was sanctioning, or even applauding, a model whereby general officers challenge (Powell) or actively endorse (Petraeus) the civilian administration's national security policy—because those actions did not harm their careers—but the interpretation is difficult to avoid. While spirited debate benefits our understanding of key issues, air leaders must ultimately be careful not to affect civil-military relations in detrimental ways. In closing, I note this example primarily to illustrate the complexity of national security and defense policy making and why the USAF needs to place much more emphasis on preparing officers from an early age to participate actively, and effectively, in providing an "air-minded" approach.

Kathleen A. Mahoney-Norris, PhD
Col, USAFR, Retired
Air Command and Staff College