

The Legacy of Airpower

By Peter Grier

IN REMARKS to AFA's National Convention in Washington, D. C., Secretary of the Air Force Sheila E. Widnall observed that many fail to recognize all that the United States Air Force does to protect American security and build a safer world.

"Sometimes, people miss the whole story," she said.

When the service launches precision weapons, the attack makes front-page news around the globe. But less dramatic actions, such as military liaison with counterparts in newly free nations in central Europe or the airlifting of humanitarian aid to hard-pressed nations, can pass relatively unnoticed.

"More often, our people perform their missions in quiet, away from the glare of publicity. It seems clear to me that this quiet, steady work will ultimately have at least as profound an effect on our world as our more spectacular feats," the Secretary said in her September 18 address.

As it begins its fiftieth-anniversary year, the legacy of the Air Force is certainly a golden one, declared the top service officials who spoke at the AFA event.

Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman, Air Force Chief of Staff, noted that Air Force pilots and maintainers started running into tough challenges almost from the moment the service was established on September 18, 1947. In the following year, the Berlin Airlift grew into a major test of wills between the US and the Soviet Union.

It was USAF airlifters—a nonlethal type of airpower—that formed the backbone of this initial Air Force success, said General Fogleman.

Potent Symbol

To this day, he added, the image of a huge USAF airlifter arriving in a distant crisis zone remains one of the nation's most powerful and important symbols.

"When that thing lands, it doesn't

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represent the United States Air Force—it *is* the United States of America," General Fogleman said in his September 17 speech to AFA's delegates.

In the years following that first Berlin crisis, he continued, new Air Force F-86 Sabre jet fighters tangled with Soviet-produced MiG-15s over the Korean war zone, establishing air superiority that allowed the United States and its allies to retake lost territory on the peninsula. Heavy bombers—and later, ICBMs—strengthened a developing US national strategy of containment of communism.

The Chief of Staff said the Vietnam War stressed US aircrews to the limit in the 1960s and early 1970s. Later, American airpower helped further the nation's geopolitical aims from Grenada and Panama to Iraq and Bosnia-Herzegovina—the last being a war zone where skeptics thought USAF's sophisticated aircraft and weapons would have little effect.

In fact, the opposite was true. Ambassador Richard C. Holbrooke, Washington's special US negotiator in the Balkans and the primary architect of the Dayton peace accord, told the AFA gathering that Operation De-

liberate Force, the brief but intense air campaign against Bosnian Serb positions in September 1995, was the decisive factor in bringing the recalcitrant Serbs to the peace table.

Ambassador Holbrooke said that the US diplomatic effort wouldn't have succeeded "without the United States Air Force and Navy and the precision bombing."

Of the bombing, he observed, "The precision of it, its immediate and visible effects on the negotiations, made a real difference. Those people who argue about airpower have got to stop arguing only about Vietnam and talk about what can be done in the [Persian] Gulf, what was done in Bosnia."

Ambassador Holbrooke said he believed at the time of Deliberate Force that "more bombing will give us better diplomacy, and it was true."

US airpower has always been a major force because it has focused on the priorities of the nation, noted General Fogleman. "For the past half-century, the United States Air Force has been the nation's full-service Air Force," he said. "Meeting the challenges of the future with air- and spacepower depends on the United States Air Force staying focused on the priorities of the nation."

As the Air Force moves forward with its long-range plans, "we will make sure that it is based upon national priorities and joint perspective," said General Fogleman.

Secretary Widnall also spoke of Joint Vision 2010, declaring that it "defines a pathway for the US military" and "outlines a broad framework for understanding joint warfare in the decades to come," and that will shape "our service contributions to the joint forces of the future."

Air Force Style

Secretary Widnall went on, "Our contributions to the operational concept outlined by [Chairman of the

Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. John M. Shalikashvili]—to the high-tempo, precision-oriented, information-intensive framework outlined in [the Joint Vision paper] will be obvious to anyone familiar with the style of warfare that our air forces have conducted for decades.”

Meanwhile, added Secretary Widnall, the coming decades likely will bring “a time of historic transformation in the Air Force, a quiet revolution that sweeps across our operational capabilities” as the service implements recommendations from such USAF-directed studies as “New World Vistas,” “Spacecast 2020,” and “Air Force 2025.”

Today’s Air Force game plan—“Global Reach, Global Power”—was formulated and published in 1990 and revised in 1992. It has been a good strategic vision, said General Fogleman, but it is nearly seven years old and needs to be updated. He said that the just-finished Joint Chiefs of Staff paper points the way to this refurbished Air Force conceptual vision.

The JCS Chairman’s plan lays out four basic operational concepts for US military forces, noted General Fogleman. They are dominant maneuver, precision engagement, full-dimensional protection, and focused logistics.

■ The overall aim of “dominant maneuver” is to control an adversary’s battlespace. Out of that, the Air Force has produced the concept of “air dominance”—a degree of aerospace control that is a considerable leap over the “air superiority” goal of the past. Said General Fogleman, “We want to own the other guy’s airspace. If you own somebody else’s airspace and operate with impunity, you greatly simplify the task of the Joint Force Commander.”

Air- and spacepower, the General said, are “ideally suited to taking away the enemy’s sanctuaries and striking his forces, wherever they may be.” The B-2 bomber, F-22 fighter, and Joint Strike Fighter represent the necessary components of future air dominance, he continued.

■ The E-8 Joint Surveillance and Target Attack Radar System aircraft, the Joint Direct Attack Munition, and other advances in information-gathering, targeting, and weaponry will

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provide the “precision engagement” needed to achieve overall objectives.

General Fogleman defined the basic concept of precision engagement in simple terms: “the ability to apply lethal force very discriminately.” In the US effort to develop technologies for precision engagement, USAF has been in the lead. Its Airborne Laser program could demonstrate the ultimate precision engagement weapon, said General Fogleman. “It’s one of the few truly revolutionary ideas that I’ve seen embedded in any program of any of the services.”

■ “Full-dimensional protection” will be another category of air dominance. This term denotes a battlefield condition in which US forces enjoy “not just freedom from attack, but freedom to attack,” said General Fogleman. The goal is “denying the enemy any kind of sanctuary.”

■ The whole effort will have to be supported by an element General Fogleman called “focused logistics.” In the past, spare parts and other consumables were relatively cheap, and information and transportation were hard to come by. That meant commanders stockpiled as much equipment as possible before launching campaigns.

Today, the increasing technological sophistication of aircraft has made parts and supplies much more expensive, but transportation and information costs, on the other hand, have gone down. That means logistics must be focused on delivering just enough, and at just the right time, to maximize

the military punch within the limits of relatively small budgets.

The Air Force is striving mightily to understand the forces shaping the future and to adapt to them. “Only with vision and careful planning will the Air Force achieve its true potential in the twenty-first century,” General Fogleman said.

The USAF vision effort will intensify and reach its culmination in the next few months as Air Force leaders attempt to draw together the strands of their long-range planning process. It won’t be easy.

Secretary Widnall said, “We are ready to step up to the toughest possible challenge—of getting away from the ‘in’ basket, of getting away from today’s problems, to define a goal decades away, and begin to mobilize resources toward reaching it.”

C-17 to the Fore

Secretary Widnall reviewed the service’s modernization plans, offering special praise for the C-17 airlifter program. Once mired in difficulties, she said, the program has been put strongly back on track and is meeting one of the most urgent operational needs of theater commanders.

“That aircraft,” she said, “has proven its worth in spades in operations around the world. It had barely reached operational status, in fact, when it demonstrated exactly why we needed it in the operations in Bosnia. It got rave reviews at every level of government—but the most important were those that it received from the people in country, working in the mud to make that peacekeeping mission a success, who depended on that aircraft for their lifeline. And it didn’t let them down.”

Air Force plans call for procuring a total of 120 advanced C-17s, about one-third of which already have been delivered. Secretary Widnall also spoke up for conventional bomber upgrades, the F-22 fighter, the Joint Strike Fighter, and space modernization.

The F-22 fighter, said the Secretary, lies “at the core of our future capabilities.” For that reason, Air Force leaders are maintaining a close working relationship with Lockheed Martin Corp., the contractor, and doing whatever is necessary to make the F-22 a successful program.

“We don’t want any big surprises,” the Secretary said. ■