



AIRMEN ABSENT

THE Air Force doesn't adequately prepare its officers for top Joint Staff or joint command jobs—and doesn't seem to care. This presents a grave risk to USAF's long-term influence—and US national security—because it means the service's message is not being heard in the nation's war councils.

Such were the observations from two distinguished panels at the Air Force Association's Air Warfare Symposium in Orlando, Fla., held in mid-February. Panelists warned that if the Air Force doesn't learn to speak up for itself, it may never shake its current image as merely a supporting service, instead of a primary agent of the nation's power.

USAF, said a collection of former Air Force Secretaries and retired top generals, must also take seriously the need to groom credible candidates for joint command jobs because the service is being locked out of top-level war and strategy planning.

What the Air Force brings to the fight and why its contribution is critical are important facts that will probably only increase in relevance in the coming years. However, the Air Force's aversion to telling its story broadly means Congress

and the American people are getting the USAF story elsewhere. The information is incomplete, confusing, or false.

"The Air Force is not good at telling its own story," former Air Force Secretary F. Whitten Peters told the Orlando audience. "It's tended to shy away from the press; it's tended to shy away from Congress, which I think is a mistake."

Peters, on a panel with two other recent Secretaries of the Air Force—James G. Roche and Michael W. Wynne—said USAF is indispensable because it's the only service whose full-time job is to concentrate on integrating and innovating in air, space, and cyber.

Airmen, Peters said, excel at their "ability to think about a problem and use existing systems to come up with something new, which provides different alternatives for the President." He said he's pleased that Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III "has gone back to talking about global reach, power, and vigilance, because I think that those three concepts give you a template for talking about this."

Global power may be delivering humanitarian relief one day, or it may be about a new long-range bomber, Peters said.

But "what I think is important is unity of explanation. And I think it's important that everyone in the Air Force senior leadership be able to describe how the Air Force hangs together—why the budget is as it is, why in one year we favor one thing over another, simply because of phasing of requirements."

Terribly, Terribly Important

Because of the different "tribes" within the service, however, the service often undercuts itself by allowing internal disputes to become public, former Secretary Roche said. The Air Force doesn't speak with a unified voice, he said.

"Washington is a nasty place, and 'divide and conquer' is something that's always been done. We just make it easier for the enemies of the Air Force to do it because we divide by ourselves," Roche said.

He found it hard to believe that as the top USAF leadership was working hard to save the F-22 in the middle of the last decade, there were "former general officers from [Air Mobility Command] that were bad-mouthing the F-22 to the press."

Roche had a long Navy career and noted that in that service, "up to the decision



USAF tells its story poorly and lands few key joint jobs. These problems are self-inflicted—and serious.

By John A. Tirpak, Executive Editor

point, [there was] lots of fighting. But once the [Chief of Naval Operations] made a decision, it was one Navy. And no matter what you did or with whom you spoke, the audience always got the position of one Navy.”

He asserted that “this notion of having ‘one Air Force’ is terribly, terribly important, and we don’t do it.”

Roche also urged the Air Force to use simpler language in describing what it does. In the Navy, he said, it’s “power projection, sea control.” The Air Force needs a similar slogan, he said. “My candidate is: ‘long-range strike and support of forces on the ground.’”

Wynne said his advice to Maj. Gen. Steven L. Kwast, head of USAF’s Quadrennial Defense Review, is “in the face of reduced resources, to really frame the future of the Air Force. And do it in a straightforward manner that you can explain in one page. Return to the strategic Air Force.” He also said that it should resonate with lawmakers that “if our Air Force is never used, it has achieved its finest goal.”

Lani Kass, a former Joint Staff and Air Force policy advisor speaking during a panel about the “Absence of Blue Suits” in

top combatant command jobs, took issue with a current buzzword, “air-mindedness.”

“I don’t know what it means,” Kass said. A much better shorthand, she said, would be something like “the three-dimensional perspective—an airman’s perspective. Be proud of that.” But “‘air-mindedness’ means nothing.” You don’t hear the Navy speaking about sea-mindedness or the Army extolling the virtues of land-mindedness, she noted.

Kass, who has taught at the National War College, said she was always impressed that every one of her Marine Corps students “could, in his sleep, tell me everything there was to know about Iwo Jima and Belleau Wood and why we need the [V-22] Osprey. And I got the same from every sailor and every soldier. I did not get that from every airman.”

She said that on her first day on the job with the Joint Staff, she thought she had made a wrong turn because she saw nearly all Army uniforms there. Later, “after the Air Force was decapitated and Secretary Wynne and General [T. Michael] Moseley departed, I came downstairs to the Joint Staff, [and] I thought I was among the Navy Staff.”

The point, Kass said, is “if you’re not in the room, if you’re not in the meetings, it just doesn’t matter how great is the story you’re going to tell.”

She argued that “this is probably the most important issue facing our Air Force. It is an existential issue in this joint world. ... We are not well-represented where ... decisions are made.” She added that only people in “blue suits” are aware of the fact that the Air Force has been in continuous combat for more than 20 years. “We don’t tell that story. We don’t have our rightful place at the table, even when we are in the room.”

Kass said if she could work her will, she would “kill” the phrase “all in,” which the Air Force trumpeted to show that it was a full partner in Iraq and Afghanistan. The phrase “makes us subservient and makes the other services the warfighters. We are warfighters as well. And that distinction—which we have done to ourselves—has placed us outside the ‘Band of Brothers.’ We are considered a support service and we are taken for granted.” She said the Air Force has become like a utility to the other services, much like electricity or toilets, and isn’t noticed unless it isn’t there.

The Air Force also fails to send out “spies” when there are “Tank” meetings of the Joint Chiefs, “to see what the other services are thinking, what’s going to be discussed, where is the Chairman standing on the issues.” Every service does this “except one—and that’s ours,” said Kass.

Speaking on the COCOM panel with Kass were retired Gen. Charles F. Wald, former US European Command deputy commander; retired Maj. Gen. Lawrence A. Stutzriem, former director of plans, policy, and strategy for NORAD and US Northern Command; and retired Lt. Gen. David A. Deptula, former head of Air Force intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

Deptula said USAF’s capabilities in exploiting air, space, and cyber have to be well-understood in the planning, development, and execution phases of war.

“The military can’t do any of those activities if Air Force leadership is absent from the key military organizations involved,” he asserted.

Deptula noted that since the Air Force was created in 1947, only five regional combatant commanders have been Air Force officers, and two of those were put in place in the last six years: one NORTHCOM commander and one US Southern Command commander.

Mastery of global reach, power, and vigilance have made the Air Force “indispensable,” Deptula said, but it has created a problem for USAF.

“We’ve made it look easy—when it’s not—and as a result, too many [take] what we do for granted and don’t understand the reason for a separate Air Force.”

Too many—especially on Capitol Hill, where staffers with military experience are extremely rare—“still mistakenly believe that all the Air Force does is support the Army,” Deptula said. “In fact, today, there are some who are questioning why we even need a separate Air Force.” Given the severe budget constraints and an upcoming Quadrennial Defense Review, “those questions are going to continue and they’re only going to grow in intensity.”

He continued, “Part of the reason those questions and misunderstandings are out there today is the ... absence of Air Force leadership on the Joint Staff and at the combatant commands over the last decade. That needs to be corrected.”

Though USAF is “doing better” in joint and COCOM assignments, he said, “without a presence at key leadership levels,” alternatives offered by the Air Force “won’t be considered. And our nation will suffer as a result.”

Wald noted that the Air Force needs to have “the right people ready” when a CO-

COM position comes up for competition. Then, “the collaboration and collegiality among the four stars is hugely critical. ... In the past, there’s been a little competition at times. And it hasn’t been healthy, and we’ve eaten our own.”

Stutzriem reported on a survey he has done, talking to Air Force general officers who have served in joint commands or senior Joint Staff positions to see how the Air Force could improve its representation in these key fighting posts.

To begin with, Stutzriem said, no one had previously asked these officers to “download” their observations and experiences, “and that ... may be one of the most salient observations.”

Street Cred

Air Force officers headed for joint jobs get very little preparation, and once in them, are highly disconnected from their own service. After their return to blue suit jobs, their experience is neither tapped nor valued, Stutzriem said.

A Pentagon inspector general report from about 15 years ago, Stutzriem said, “was very critical of the Air Force” and found the service was holding back its top talent from joint positions.

The “other services are aiming to develop their officers for [joint task force] and [combatant commander] command; Air Force aims its best talent for CSAF—to become Chief—and top jobs within the service,” he observed.

Those surveyed said they got no preparation for joint jobs, especially in the war zone. “There’s frustration that they were ignorant about command structures, processes, battle rhythm, cultures that were in command, and it took a lot of time to assimilate [that], and that impacted their ‘street credibility’ from the start.”

Once in joint posts, “it was unanimous: a feeling of being cut off,” Stutzriem reported. One surveyed officer noted that Army and Navy flag officers convened frequent telecoms with leaders of their own service staff, while the airmen felt “abandoned” by their fellow blue-suiters.

If joint officers came across an opportunity that could be met by an Air Force solution, they were told to “stay in their lane” by the corporate Air Force—that “it wasn’t their job to deal with certain aspects that they were advocating,” Stutzriem said.

Once back from their joint position, the officers said their experience in the combat zone “was not respected” and there was little interest in their perspectives.

There’s been a “significant change of attitude” in the last few years, Stutzriem said, and the Air Force is now actively

building its warrior credentials. Gen. G. Michael Hoston III, head of Air Combat Command, has taken steps to bring the [combined force air component commander] forward and give greater authority to his people in-theater. Stutzriem claimed that Hoston told Army Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, “whatever check [you write], I will cash,” and that has started to ease Army disdain toward blue-suiters.

Stutzriem said the implications for his survey are that “we need to develop airmen at the O-6 level [for joint jobs]. ... The Chief needs to connect better with his general officers in joint jobs. And finally, there is a continuing need to evaluate, as General Hoston did, that there’s better street credibility to make those generals more ... marketable for key joint jobs.”

He added that officers need to be exposed to joint positions earlier in their careers to gain the experience that will make them competitive later, to switch back and forth between blue suit and joint positions while growing in each.

“But the fact is, we need to take a look at our personnel system, to be able to design these kinds of experiences into a career—to do it intentionally, as opposed to just happening by accident.”

Wynne said the Air Force’s tendency to groom officers for its own needs comes back to bite the service in many ways.

“It was so frustrating for me to nominate COCOMs and to nominate people for [the] Intelligence Community because they did not have the education—because we squandered their career making them great, great pilots.”

Air Force leaders need to understand “the technology underpinning the domain and the national policy implications of those domains,” Wynne said. When they go to interdepartmental meetings, “they need to understand it from their customer’s perspective. And when they go to talk to Congress, they need to understand it from the congressional perspective. Frankly, pushing education is the key even in the face of reduced resources, and we’ve got to promote it.”

Kass said the Air Force has nothing to be embarrassed about, but seems to be. Other service officers, she said, walk into a Pentagon meeting room “like they own it. An airman slinks in, sits to the side, and rarely articulates an airman’s view.”

The Air Force is “not a second-rate service,” she admonished. “We are America’s asymmetric advantage. But you don’t hear airmen saying that. The airmen who are in the joint arena would say, ‘We are here to support the warfighter.’” ■