

***THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AIR FORCE  
IRREGULAR WARFARE STRATEGY***



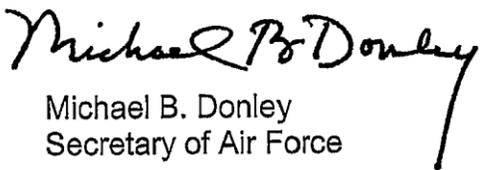
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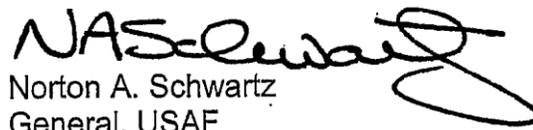
## **FOREWORD**

Our Nation is at war. Since our inception, the Nation has asked the Air Force to create forces no adversary could match. The Air Force is now in its seventh decade answering that call. Now in today's persistent global conflict, the Nation demands that we also create capabilities no adversary can defeat by using asymmetric and indirect means through insurgencies, terrorism, or transnational criminal activities. We have approved this strategy to form our response to these irregular challenges we face in the Long War.

This is a new strategy document to chart how airpower's inherent flexibility and adaptability can shape the operational environment, build positive relationships, and erode the effectiveness of both state and non-state adversaries. The Air Force must successfully balance both the capability to wage irregular warfare and the capability to enable a partner nation to fight irregular warfare. This strategy charts the ways and means by which we adapt to the irregular challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Our intent is to provide definitive guidance to initiate new approaches and synchronize Air Force actions to balance the requirements levied upon airpower in irregular warfare with the concurrent need to maintain decisive advantage in conventional warfare.

Our Nation demands that we use our perspective and energy to produce decisive effects wherever and whenever required. This strategy for irregular warfare aims to answer our Nation's call.

  
Michael B. Donley  
Secretary of Air Force

  
Norton A. Schwartz  
General, USAF  
Chief of Staff

# **THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AIR FORCE**

## **IRREGULAR WARFARE WHITE PAPER**

*Irregular warfare is “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s). Irregular warfare favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capacities, in order to erode an adversary’s power, influence, and will.” JCS Pub 1-02*

### **1. PURPOSE**

The war against violent extremism—the “Long War”<sup>1</sup>—is a generational struggle which we must win. The asymmetric advantages of air, space and cyberspace power are decisive factors to the Nation’s future success. This paper provides definitive guidance to initiate new approaches and synchronize Air Force actions to balance the requirements levied upon airpower in irregular warfare with the concurrent need to maintain decisive advantage in conventional warfare. It charts a strategy to adapt to the irregular challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In so doing, it also capitalizes on the efforts that resulted in the publication of Air Force Doctrine Document 2-3—*Irregular Warfare*.

This strategy is based on the premise that IW must be viewed as a method of warfare that is both different from and complementary to conventional warfare. Therefore, threats and challenges posed by IW should not rely on a specific suite of capabilities applicable only to IW. The Air Force must provide combatant commanders with critical capabilities to defend the United States and its interests against all consequential threats—across the full spectrum of military operations. We must be as competent in and capable of conducting IW as we are in conventional warfare. **Accordingly, this strategy leverages airpower’s<sup>2</sup> inherent flexibility and adaptability to shape the operational environment, by building positive relationships with partner nations and fielding appropriate capabilities, thereby eroding the effectiveness of both state and non-state adversaries.**

### **2. STRATEGIC CONTEXT: THE CHALLENGES OF “IRREGULAR WARFARE”**

**The use of IW to unhinge and defeat a militarily stronger adversary is as old as war itself.** It is described in the earliest treatises on combat—from Sun Tzu to Thucydides. Actions which today would be characterized as elements of IW have been successfully employed against Greece and Rome, Napoleon’s France, and Hitler’s Germany—to name but a few historic examples. Often, these tactics contributed to the defeat of the superior power and the demise of empires—the Ottoman, the British and

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the term “Long War” is inclusive of the Global War on Terrorism, Global War on Terror, or any other term used to describe the protracted fight against violent extremism.

<sup>2</sup> For this paper airpower includes air, space, and cyberspace capabilities, as airpower was used in AFDD 2-3.

the Soviet empires being the most noteworthy examples--through national over-stretch, erosion of will, and sheer exhaustion.

More recently, post-World War II decolonization, “national liberation movements”, proxy conflicts, the rise of globalization, demographic pressures, and ethno-religious strife have all made IW a vexing strategic challenge—particularly with the end of the Cold War removing the backdrop of shared threat. Indeed, when one considers the entire history of conflict, **IW has been very regular—the most prevalent form of warfare.**

The complexities of the global environment and the changing character of 21<sup>st</sup> Century warfare have led would-be adversaries to adopt asymmetric approaches to attack key levers of U.S. power. Their strategies— some of which can be broadly categorized in doctrine as “Irregular Warfare”—are specifically designed to avoid the costs and risks of confronting superior powers head-on. In many cases, IW-based strategies are a function of weakness rather than choice, and are the only strategies available to a weaker force. Adversaries deliberately circumvent core military advantages and exploit vulnerabilities, while seeking to undermine the superior power’s international support and domestic resolve.

Every “irregular war”—like every “conventional” conflict—exists within a unique strategic context, requiring an understanding of the specific nature of that struggle. Today the Nation is engaged in a generational fight—the Long War—against a transnational movement organized around a radical, insular ideology of cultural hostility. While historical approaches to deterrence have a role, the current threat, arising largely from shadowy, non-state actors of various religious, ethnic, and economic motivations, is difficult to combat with direct, force-on-force approaches. These adversaries are not generally susceptible to the same deterrent methods that influence and constrain conflicts between states.

Given both history and current realities, IW should not be considered a lesser included case of conventional warfare. Skills for effectively conducting conventional warfare are not necessarily transferable directly to IW. Accordingly, all Services are thinking anew about the challenges of IW and the innovative approaches it requires. This strategy applies the lessons of past conflicts and fosters a global community of partner airmen to leverage Global Vigilance, Global Reach, and Global Power against irregular threats worldwide. At the same time, we must remember that all adaptive competitors are translating lessons from recent conflicts into new warfighting concepts, capabilities and doctrines. **Consequently, the Air Force must balance the requirements levied upon airpower in IW with the concurrent need to maintain decisive advantage in conventional warfare.**

When the U.S. engages in IW, the USAF expects to be a part of the larger, interagency effort. IW operations are ideally conducted by working by, with, and through partner nations, but this is not always the case and the Joint Force may have to operate without effective partner nation support. In either case, the military’s role—in concert with other instruments of statecraft—is to establish a secure environment in which partner nations

can flourish—ultimately without direct assistance. This does not necessarily imply the total elimination of internal strife, but it does require the state to have adequate capability and capacity to defend and care for its population. Airpower directly contributes to the achievement of these conditions well beyond its military application.

### 3. AIRPOWER IN THE IRREGULAR WARFARE ENVIRONMENT

The effects of airpower transcend the spectrums of conflict and deterrence. Airpower is most often associated with classic uses of power—direct confrontation with the enemy, or the direct approach. However, it is the indirect approach—eroding opponents' power, will, and influence by, with, and through partners—that offers the most strategic application of airpower in the Long War. **In these roles, properly employed, airpower enhances government legitimacy, projects national sovereignty into remote areas, accelerates a nation's overall development, and provides an asymmetric advantage over adversaries.**

**Indirect Methods:** Airpower is a *strategic investment* in partner nations' strength and prosperity. It promotes the unification of a country torn by strife, acting as a catalyst for economic, technological, and intellectual progress. Airpower helps establish the physical and virtual infrastructure essential for the internal growth and well-being of the nation. **It bolsters all instruments of national power and provides visible, practical, and effective means to consolidate governance and provide for the populace.** Airpower enables governments to:

- Provide political leaders immediate, largely unimpeded access to all territory to demonstrate governance and legitimacy by delivering goods, services, and humanitarian relief.
- Support military and civil ground forces, including police, in operations to provide security, develop infrastructure, and enhance the stability of local governance.
- Strengthen internal security mechanisms by providing air mobility; aerial resupply; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); command and control; and strike.
- Inhibit the ability of hostile forces to move openly or in large numbers without fear of detection and attack.
- Patrol and assist in securing porous border areas.
- Deny insurgents and terrorists sanctuary in ungoverned and remote areas.
- Detect and interdict the development and maintenance of training facilities, support installations and other infrastructure for insurgent and terrorist organizations.
- Complement and extend the reach of ground forces and internal security units.
- Deter and defeat external aggression by presenting flexible and adaptable options for projecting capability beyond national boundaries.
- Promote civil sector advancement, since air and cyberspace infrastructure is inherently dual-use. Most notably, it enables technological and economic advancement, and fosters national identity and pride.

Airpower capabilities can provide the edge that allows an indigenous government to seize and maintain the initiative and prevent terrorists and insurgents from shaping and pacing the conflict. Airmen, regardless of nationality, provide valuable options to decision makers and joint commanders based on their unique perspective.

**Direct Methods:** Where insurgencies or other threats have been allowed to mature and our partners can no longer contend with them alone, Global Vigilance, Global Reach, and Global Power provide the necessary options to defend U.S. interests.

As demonstrated in Iraq, host nation and coalition ground forces are dependent upon airpower in major counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. The most important elements have often been mobility and ISR, but the list of airpower contributions is long. Airpower brings the joint and coalition team: theater command and control, precision strike, close air support, information operations, electronic warfare, agile combat support, show of force, aeromedical evacuation, psychological operations, airbase construction and opening, computer network attack, and strategic communication to name a few. Additionally, airmen, as part of the joint team, also provide linguistic support, education, medical support, legal advice, civil engineering, public affairs, political-military support and security training.

Airpower's role is equally important when the adversary is a rogue regime that threatens regional stability or other U.S. interests. The joint team of airpower and special operations forces offers the proven capability to conduct unconventional warfare as demonstrated in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. The speed, flexibility, and precision of today's Air Force can extend the effect of a small U.S. presence in support of a friendly insurgent movement and enhance their viability against a much stronger foe.

The direct application of airpower capabilities to IW requires evolution of our operating concepts; tactics, techniques, and procedures; and command and control structures. It also requires the addition of new material capabilities for the USAF toolkit, especially capabilities that can be effectively shared with partner nations. The long timelines for weapons development and the fielding of advanced capabilities must be significantly shortened. **We must adapt more quickly than the enemy.** Therefore, we must enhance the adaptive nature of Air Force capabilities while creating additional capabilities for the indirect approach. Striking the right balance between conflict prevention via the indirect approach and costly reactive intervention, primarily through the direct approach, is essential.

#### **4. ENDS: ORGANIZE, TRAIN, AND EQUIP TO WIN THE LONG WAR**

The Air Force must be organized, trained, and equipped to provide combatant commanders with sufficient capability and capacity to defend the U.S., its interests, and allies. **We owe the Nation an Air Force that is as competent and capable in irregular warfare as it is in conventional warfare.**

Among the Air Force's top priorities is winning the Long War. According to national-level strategic guidance, the desired end-state of this conflict is: (1) states able to contain terrorists to sub-state criminal activity that does not threaten U.S. interests; (2) U.S. ability to prevent the use of ungoverned and under-governed areas as a launching pad for attacks; and (3) state sponsors of terrorism and irregular threats are deterred and/or defeated. Additionally, we have a nonnegotiable responsibility to prevent the acquisition and use of weapons of mass destruction. **It is to these ends that the Air Force, as part of the joint team, must develop capabilities to win the Long War, defend the Nation, and preclude irregular threats from becoming catastrophic.** Further, developing Air Force IW capabilities to fight the Long War more effectively establishes an enduring foundation for coping with unanticipated irregular challenges beyond the defined Long War.

## 5. WAYS: FIVE PILLARS OF GLOBAL SHAPING

The ways of this strategy are founded on five categories of activities we must be able to perform simultaneously across the globe. **These pillars represent the methods by which the advantages of air, space, and cyberspace capabilities will be applied to meet irregular threats and shape the global security environment.**

**Develop, sustain, and expand partnerships:** Across the spectrum of 21<sup>st</sup> Century conflict, multinational coalitions will remain crucial to achieving U.S. objectives. Partnerships are built on relationships. These ties are based on several considerations, such as the shared experiences and unique perspectives that airmen bring to problem-solving. This includes a sharing of capabilities through common equipment and training. **We must leverage these common qualities to expand and strengthen our team of partners.**

The ***Global Partnership Strategy***<sup>3</sup> supports this by providing guidance on building international relationships, partnership capacity, and interoperable capabilities that help shape the environment for our expeditionary air, space, and cyberspace forces conducting global operations. By capitalizing on the global community of like-minded and similarly trained and equipped airmen, we will strengthen coalitions against those state and non-state actors who strive to disrupt global security. This includes long-standing allies, as well as developing nations and partners who aspire to or share our values and interests.

**Build partnership capacity (BPC):** We must build the capability and capacity of partner nations to address domestic and regional issues that threaten stability and governance.

Experience suggests that most irregular threats originate in under-governed or ill-governed areas and often move into states that lack the capability to defend against them. The Air Force will focus BPC efforts on those partners who contribute to regional

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<sup>3</sup> *Air Force Global Partnership Strategy, Building Partnerships for the 21st Century, 2008*

stability or those who are at risk and need airpower to protect their legitimacy, sovereignty, or survival. Where insurgencies have flared, we can assist our partners with the complex tasks of maintaining security and governance. In some cases, the USAF may be required to temporarily act in place of a partner nation air force where such a force does not exist, has been lost or is ineffective.

**Expand influence in ungoverned and under-governed territories:** These sanctuaries represent the maneuver space that terrorists and insurgents exploit to develop networks and capabilities that threaten U.S. interests.

Airpower is essential to restricting enemy freedom of action in these areas. U.S. and partner nation airpower contributions can help remedy the underlying conditions such as social injustice, religious persecution, and economic disparity that allow radicalization, insurgency, and terrorism to thrive. Humanitarian assistance, infrastructure construction, education, law enforcement and security efforts can all benefit from airpower employment, and in some cases airpower capabilities (such as airlift) provide options which are not otherwise possible. Air, space, and cyberspace power provide the means to access, secure, develop, and control these challenging geographic areas.

**Find, fix, finish, or isolate insurgents and terrorists:** Despite all efforts to mitigate the underlying conditions that give rise to insurgency and terrorism, hard-core militants must still be isolated or eliminated. Whether executed by our partners—the preferable solution—or by the U.S. itself, this mission will remain critical to defending our homeland while winning the Long War.

Global Vigilance, Global Reach, and Global Power enable the joint team to rapidly find, fix and engage enemies with precision. Vigilance, reach, and power in air, space, and cyberspace are key mechanisms to provide the situational awareness, access, and force employment capacity to defend against a globally dispersed threat. Without question, inherent air, space and cyberspace power characteristics such as *minimal intrusiveness, swift response, and exceptional situational awareness* are vital to any joint force commander. Whether these capabilities are combined with partner nations, elements of a joint force, or used unilaterally, they form the basis for the ability to defend our Nation and its interests around the globe.

**Broaden the shield of deterrence:** Enhanced U.S. and partner nation capability and resolve increase the capacity to deter those deemed undeterrable by Cold War methods. By, with, and through our partners and the global community of like-minded airmen, we will develop new concepts and capabilities and provide the underpinnings for deterring non-state adversaries and their state sponsors.

Today's deterrence shield might be effective at the upper end of the conflict spectrum, but lacks a sufficient range of options to deter those who choose to attack on the fringes of U.S. interests or using organizations which are resistant or immune to the leverage underpinning a deterrent strategy. Increased proficiency and capability dealing with non-state and rogue state actors will provide additional options for U.S. leaders. The

shield of deterrence can be expanded by demonstrating the capability and will to execute a potent, multi-disciplinary offense in concert with a multi-layered defense. Deterrence is a product of effective capability.

We must develop the innovative operating concepts and flexible capabilities that build the five pillars of global shaping. This will enhance our capacity to provide the Joint Force Commander with the full spectrum of air, space and cyberspace capabilities necessary to win the Long War against violent extremism, defeat irregular threats, secure regional stability, and deter hostile behavior by state and non-state adversaries.

## **6. MEANS: AIRPOWER FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY IRREGULAR ENVIRONMENT**

The Air Force must organize, train, and equip a force that is equally proficient and capable in irregular and conventional warfare, providing a portfolio of capabilities that reflect the high-low mix of adversaries and types of conflict that characterize today's national security environment. In addition to ensuring joint commanders receive the IW capabilities needed for today's fight, we must deepen our institutional commitment to developing IW expertise and capabilities across the entire force. Our general purpose forces, for example, must be sufficiently flexible to contribute meaningful and decisive effects in the irregular warfare battlespace. Where the imperative exists, we must also develop niche capabilities for the irregular warfare environment. Our responsibility also includes "right-sizing" our enabling capabilities – such as ISR, cyber, and command and control -- to meet joint requirements across the spectrum of conflict -- from deterrence and conventional operations to irregular warfare and treaty monitoring. Building partnership capacity is key to our success in the irregular warfare environment; as such, we must continue to grow Airmen who can train, advise and assist their coalition counterparts to eliminate terrorist networks and perform internal defense. The air, space, and cyberspace capabilities required to execute this strategy cut across the total force and nearly all functional areas. Special operations forces (SOF) will continue to play a significant role in IW, but enhancing the versatility of general purpose force (GPF) capabilities is fundamental to our IW strategy.

In addition to our current capabilities, we require additional *means* to adapt appropriately to irregular challenges. These challenges, which span the spectrum of doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities, must be addressed as part of our Air Force Corporate Structure process. At every level within our Service, we must evaluate our contributions to IW and find the correct balance to conduct operations equally well within both irregular and major combat environments. To initiate this strategy, the Air Force will execute the following tasks:

- *The Air Force will establish an operational concept and a new Air Force CONOPS to provide an enduring mechanism to specify the capabilities and capacities required for Air Force GPF and SOF in IW and develop procedures for GPF conducting IW and BPC missions.*

- *The Air Force will establish a permanent GPF advisory capability for steady-state protracted IW requirements to complement existing SOF advisory capabilities. This will include an aviation advisor schoolhouse, which will preserve the hard-won experience gleaned from current efforts to stand up the Iraqi Air Force and the Afghan Army Air Corps. This GPF advisory capability will include training programs for the employment of advisors as part of a COIN effort, including participation in—and leadership of—Provincial Reconstruction Teams and similar efforts. The Air Force will evaluate and leverage the capabilities resident in the Total Force and the NGB State Partnership Program to meet IW requirements.*
- *The Air Force will train airmen to operate in the irregular environment, independently and in support of a ground component. We will improve our professional military education at all levels to properly emphasize airpower’s contribution in IW. We will properly educate our operational planners to best apply airpower in IW.*
- *To streamline Air Force BPC activities, we will advocate for transformation in programs such as security assistance, international military exchange training, and foreign military sales. Specifically, the Air Force seeks a synergistic application of all AF-supported security cooperation programs to accomplish U.S. national objectives.*
- *The Air Force will seek innovative ways for major commands and numbered air forces to maintain the expertise and awareness to successfully advocate for and employ airpower in IW.*
- *Develop more flexible capabilities, structures, and processes to allow for rapid fielding and adaptability of systems to meet IW requirements. This includes ISR, attack, and airlift capabilities that are not currently part of the USAF inventory and may require innovative processes to enable the necessary speed of action.*
- *Institutionalize the adaptability of proven airpower capabilities in IW, and continue to evaluate and update doctrine and command and control structures to ensure we can fly, fight, and win in all environments.*

We must also recognize the critical and, potentially, leading role of Air Force capabilities associated with agile combat support. It is common for elements such as medical, civil engineering, security forces, intelligence, air traffic control, and others to be the supported effort in IW. As seen in Iraq, the role of the Air Force in IW is much broader than flight operations.

## 7. RISK: FAILURE TO ANTICIPATE, ADAPT, AND LEARN<sup>4</sup>

First and foremost, we must mitigate our strategic risk by inculcating warrior ethos and adaptability into our culture, organizations, and processes. The success of the Air Force and the joint team depends upon the ability of our people and organizations to adopt new, relevant operational concepts, suitable to the dynamics of the strategic environment. The broad range and types of activities that comprise IW highlight the necessity for adaptation as a characteristic of the force. Future conflicts will most likely not look like Afghanistan or Iraq. However, since IW has been with us since the dawn of times, persistent irregular conflict should be considered a permanent feature of the strategic landscape.

Failure to adapt to IW reinforces our adversaries' incentive to seek asymmetric approaches to counter superior power. Only by learning from our own and others' experience and adapting airpower's advantages in IW can we retain operational and tactical freedom of action. This does not however, mitigate the risk of losing cross-domain dominance, as adversaries will continue to seek ways to overcome its advantages. Whether through the innovative use of modern weapons or the acquisition of advanced technology, non-state adversaries will seek and continue to gain capabilities to challenge freedom of action in air, space, and cyberspace. The 2007 Tamil Tigers aerial bombing of a Sri Lankan military base and Hezbollah's use of unmanned aerial vehicles and Katyusha rockets in 2006 demonstrate the potential for increased competition in these domains.

We also face a strategic risk of diminishing conventional warfare capabilities to a point that encourages development of symmetric approaches by peer competitors. This risk specifically demands the holistic, balanced approach presented in this paper to ensure the Air Force, as a member of the joint team, has a comprehensive strategy for deterring and defeating all of our Nation's potential adversaries.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The Air Force, along with our sister Services, is engaged in the irregular fight in Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, the Philippines, the Horn of Africa, and beyond. However, the irregular environment ranges far beyond these areas, and the challenges of IW will persist long after these missions have ended. We must have the courage and initiative to lay the foundation today to defend the Nation against tomorrow's irregular threats. **Redefining the Air Force for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century requires the application of proven airpower principles in new and innovative ways to the environment we fight in today—and will continue to fight in tomorrow.**

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<sup>4</sup> The line of reasoning for this risk assessment is drawn from the work of Eliot Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes, The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).