



Executive Summary

Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press



CREATING GREAT EXPECTATIONS: STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND AMERICAN AIRPOWER

Conrad C. Crane

Of all the American military services, the two most active and adept in strategic communications in the last century have been the U.S. Marine Corps and the U.S. Air Force (USAF). As the smallest service, the Marines have pursued a very successful public relations campaign to trumpet their accomplishments and ensure their survival. It is a standing joke that a Marine rifle squad consists of eight riflemen and two cameramen. As the newest service, the USAF has had evolving motivations for its communications efforts, but the main goal has always been to escape being relegated to simply a supporting role for everyone else. Initially, USAF leaders wanted to gain independence for their service and later to prove its equality and even ascendancy relative to the others. Arguably, adept strategic communications is what created the USAF. With the country's vast distances and relative isolation from continental threats, along with faith in technology and a preference to avoid bloody close combat, Americans have always been uniquely attracted to airpower, a fact that has been very successfully exploited by generations of USAF leaders. But, as a result, the nation has often entered conflicts with exorbitant expectations about what airpower could actually accomplish, creating unique challenges in strategic communications when promises did not match reality, especially in recent conflicts. American airpower doctrine built around a precision-strike capability envisions a rational targeting approach to war that is more relevant to the conventional battlefield than to wars among the people. Airpower is an important component of a unique and asymmetric American way of war that relies heavily on technology, and adaptive enemies have become very adept at using carefully crafted information campaigns as an effective counter.

Brigadier General William "Billy" Mitchell was the first great publicist for American airpower, but it was

World War II Army Air Forces (AAF) Commanding General Henry "Hap" Arnold who used strategic communications effectively to achieve independence for his service. He was able to trumpet the impressive accomplishments of his airmen without alienating the public or political leaders with unsettling images of indiscriminate destruction. However, the use of the words "precision bombing" to describe AAF doctrine established a set of expectations that could not be met with the technology of the era. USAF leaders during the Korean war complained about too many ground commanders and political leaders expecting "miracles from airpower," while, at the same time, airmen remained reluctant to "advertise limitations" to those leaders or the press. After the Korean Armistice Agreement, the service was quick to claim with determined publicity that it had achieved decisive results with an "air pressure" campaign that decimated most cities and towns in North Korea, an opinion not shared by historians.

Taking the wrong lessons from that conflict and the early Cold War, the USAF had the wrong doctrine, equipment, and training to deal with limited war in Southeast Asia. While USAF leaders chafed under restrictions that they believed limited their effectiveness in Vietnam, another resolute enemy with a simple economy thwarted superior weapons technology. The Operation LINEBACKER II bombing in December 1972, however, again allowed the service to claim decisiveness while ignoring its limitations. But it was Operation DESERT STORM and the perceived effectiveness of precision-strike technology that really launched a deluge of claims that warfare had changed and airpower was now the dominant military tool.

Air operations in the disintegrating situation in Yugoslavia seemed to support these new expectations. Seventeen days of North Atlantic Treaty Organization

(NATO) air strikes during Operation DELIBERATE FORCE in 1995 helped persuade the Serbs to accept a ceasefire in Bosnia, and then 78 more days and nights of NATO bombing during Operation ALLIED FORCE produced a settlement over Kosovo. Again, however, the initial expectations for the effectiveness and precision of air strikes proved severely exaggerated. Claims of destroyed Serb military equipment turned out to be extremely inflated, and images of unexpected civilian casualties caused severe strains in the Allied coalition while increasing Serb fears and weakening their resolve. Ironically, such incidents appeared to have reduced the will to continue the conflict on both sides. Michael Ignatieff has aptly pointed out that the journalists' accounts of the maneuvering of cruise missiles in Operation DESERT STORM and fascination with precision munitions have reinforced a myth in Western publics that war can now be thought of as laser surgery or a video game. In the dogged pursuit of the ideal of "precision bombing," the USAF has increased its capabilities tremendously, but the term "surgical air strike" remains an oxymoron. Some targeting errors and technical failures will always occur, and blast effects are often unpredictable. Mistakes will always look more sinister when air forces claim perfection.

This same scenario has played out in Afghanistan and Iraq. The quick fall of the Taliban in 2001 reinforced the predilections of leaders already enamored with airpower and new technology, but soon growing insurgencies in both countries forced a relook at the application of force in such conflicts. Despite the essential role airpower has played, a weakness of the application of long-range precision strikes in the contemporary information environment is that who controls the ground controls the message. Enemies have become very adept at crafting images of destroyed mosques and dead civilians, creating a narrative of callous and indiscriminate bombings. Foes have been much more adept in such strategic communications than the United States and NATO. Despite this, American political leaders continue to have great hopes for what airpower can do. Barack Obama has admitted that his "worst mistake" as President was his (along with European partners) resort to airpower alone in 2011 to overthrow Muammar Qaddafi in Libya without a corresponding ground force for control and rebuilding.

There are many ironies in the American experience with strategic communications and airpower. The pursuit of precision has produced truly impressive capabilities but even more exorbitant expectations. This is often fueled by service advocates seeking budget advantages or sincerely believing that the USAF has been maligned or neglected, and rarely

informed by the objective evaluation of air campaigns. Success in selling those capabilities to decision-makers and actual accomplishments utilizing them in operations have further contributed to unrealistic expectations, with political leaders especially attempting to do too much with the wrong military tool. Americans have always had great faith in technology, a fact that has assisted in the growth of the USAF while contributing to the weight of expectations that it bears. The current state of "counterinsurgency fatigue" in the United States with no desire to employ ground troops will increase burdens on airmen even more. It is not surprising that many in the international arena seek normative ways to limit the unique advantages airpower dominance brings to the United States, creating another potential obstacle.

Building on the legacy of Billy Mitchell and Hap Arnold to create and publicize a unique set of war-making capabilities, the USAF has become an unmatched air service that inspires unrealistic expectations for what American airpower can do. The hardest strategic communications task for future U.S. military leaders will not be to explain all the great things their aircraft can accomplish, but instead, to honestly admit what they cannot.

The report closes with five recommendations about strategic communications and airpower:

- Manage expectations and keep all options open.
- Educate leaders and the public.
- Be first with the truth.
- Fight the information war relentlessly.
- Invest more in foreign internal defense.

More information about the programs of the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) and U.S. Army War College (USAWC) Press may be found on the Institute's homepage at <http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/>.

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI and USAWC Press executive summaries should contact the Editor for Production via e-mail at usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.ssi-editor-for-production@mail.mil. All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: "Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, U.S. Army War College."



This Publication



SSI Website



USAWC Website