

# THE RISE AND FALL OF THE USAF

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, JUL 11 2009

The Air Force was for a long time the guiding star of US military doctrine, but it seems to be fading fast of late. Air power did not win the Second World War, but the USAF did, gaining its independence from the Army, a large share of the defense budget, and prominence in the Cold War with the promise of easy victory, what Eliot Cohen calls the Mystique of Air Power. Strategic bombing substitutes capital for labor, bypassing the carnage of trenches to deliver the knockout blows to the enemy. Mostly it never delivered, but the promise had great appeal to Americans who have been willing to invest vast sums in the effort to make it work.

The mystique survived the Cold War, and with the addition of precision weapons, seemed to pave the way for managing the peace. The Gulf War was proclaimed the first victory for air power, a thought that conveniently skips over the 100 hour ground war. NATO's fifty plus day air campaign against Serbia was a less shiny victory, but then again the US had to contend with the target reservations of the allies. Unleashed air power seemed to offer quick victory in Afghanistan. A couple of B-1s orbiting above and a special operations target controller on horseback below were all that was needed to rout the Taliban.

Since then the USAF has been in trouble. Secretary Gates fired the Chief of Staff and the Air Force Secretary ostensibly because the Air Force was neglecting its nuclear deterrent mission. A B-52 unknowingly armed with a nuclear cruise missile flew from North Dakota to a Louisiana air base where it was parked on the tarmac unguarded over night. Missile parts were shipped inadvertently to Taiwan mislabeled as something else. But basically it seemed that the Air Force was not providing enough surveillance support with unmanned systems in Iraq and Afghanistan and its highest officials were made to pay. So were Air Force programs which were cut much more by the Secretary than those of other services in his recent budget request.

But even when it is in the fight, the USAF seems to be in retreat. Although the Taliban lacks interceptors and anti-aircraft weapons, it has managed to eliminate many close air support sorties by hiding among the civilians and claiming or causing the deaths of civilians. Now by command policy the USAF flies 'show of force missions' thundering past the Taliban in the hope that they will think that the missions will turn lethal. All this is likely to accomplish is to educate the Taliban on the value of having civilians always close at hand.

Unmanned aerial systems are the current war's great innovation, but they are not an USAF monopoly. Rather there is a free-for-all among the services to develop their own systems. Ground forces that can see and target beyond the next hill will lose their need and support for air forces. Although unmanned system are not inexpensive, their cost is cheap compared to the billions needed to develop advanced fighter aircraft.

Other USAF missions stand in jeopardy. The strategic mission is best accomplished by submarine based missiles

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and will come down to that as nuclear forces are cut. Airlift is much valued, but hardly requires military manning. The Navy offers sealift, which carries the bulk of our needs, via civil service manned or chartered commercial ships. Humanitarian missions can also be accomplished by others. Sending aid on military specialized aircraft is the most expensive way of helping. Space may be a vital military mission, but justifies by itself only a much smaller Air Force.

The USAF is the world's biggest and best, but it has lost its central rationale and has little to replace it. The USAF can't win the wars we fight. And it really lacks the coercive power to win the wars it is most capable of fighting. Precision weapons are good at destroying massed armies, but are basically neutralized by the presence of civilians. The USAF has lost its mystique.

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## About the author:

**Harvey M. Sapolsky** is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.