

# Conflict & Security

## Airpower

### *The Flip Side of COIN*

Daniel Baltrusaitis

Despite the success of the U.S. military in conventional warfare, recent experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have illustrated the challenges of pursuing a counter-insurgent strategy against “asymmetric threats” such as improvised explosive devices or suicide bombers. The “asymmetric” strategy often adopted by insurgents allows a relatively weak force to incapacitate a stronger one by exploiting the stronger force’s vulnerabilities rather than meeting it head-on in conventional combat. Our current wars have focused national attention on the ability of the Army and Marine Corps to cope with this “asymmetric” environment, yet the influence of airpower has been conspicuously missing from the debate. Even the core military doctrine for counterinsurgency, or COIN, fails to acknowledge the benefits that airpower can play against these asymmetric threats. The Army and Marine Corps recently released Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (designated by the Marine Corps as Warfighting Publication 3-33.5), an impressive and influential 282-page document that skillfully addresses many difficult COIN issues. This doctrine is viewed as the overall plan for COIN operations in Iraq, and will likely become the centerpiece of new joint COIN doctrine that will guide all the armed services.<sup>1</sup> Regrettably, this impressive doc-

**Daniel Baltrusaitis** is a U.S. Air Force colonel and has held numerous command and staff positions in the Air Force as a B-1B and U-2 pilot. He is currently a PhD candidate in international relations in Georgetown University’s Department of Government.

*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.*

ument fails to inform the COIN strategist, and policymakers, on the influence of highly integrated joint COIN strategy. Rather, it treats the influence of airpower as an adjunct capability confined to a short, five-page annex of “supplemental information.” By failing to integrate the full potential of today’s airpower capabilities and by focusing almost exclusively on only the ground dimension, FM 3-24 falls short of offering U.S. decisionmakers a pragmatic, *joint* solution for the challenge of COIN.<sup>2</sup> The current doctrine fails to integrate all aspects of military power that may be implemented for the *most* effective counterinsurgency campaign. By failing to integrate airpower (or seapower) into this cornerstone doctrine document, U.S. and coalition forces risk planning operations in a disjointed fashion where planners do not understand the strengths and weaknesses of service capabilities. This paper examines the influence of airpower on COIN strategy and articulates the benefits of an integrated *joint* COIN doctrine to combat effectively the insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan.

### **Airpower Misunderstood.**

People, even military commanders and political leaders, often misunderstand the influence of airpower in a military campaign because of the claims that it is an indiscriminate weapon that induces unwarranted collateral damage, thereby damaging the campaign for hearts and minds. William Arkin, who writes an online national security column for the *Washington Post*, suggests that by accepting unsubstantiated collateral damage claims, U.S. military leaders actually undermine U.S. coalition strategy by leaving unclear the role of airstrikes against Taliban and al-Qaeda insurgents. By not stressing

that these airstrikes are attacking combatants—while at the same time safeguard civilians in that process—allows insurgents to gain an advantage in the propaganda war.<sup>3</sup> Arkin exposes the central paradox in the understanding of the use of airpower; it is an essential COIN tool, but it is often unfairly accused of being a blunt, highly destructive, instrument that undermines the COIN strategy. Civilian casualties from U.S. and NATO airstrikes in Afghanistan were one of the main storylines of last year, but these stories of civilian casualties do not tell the whole story. The use of airpower in Afghanistan has been highly effective, allowing a NATO presence across the breadth and depth of the country, denying sanctuary to insurgents while ensuring a sustained NATO offensive.

Arkin equates U.S. acceptance of collateral damage claims as equivalent to answering the following question: “When did you stop beating your wife?”<sup>4</sup> He argues that instead of accepting unsubstantiated collateral damage claims, senior leaders should highlight the fact that airpower’s effectiveness is so frustrating to the enemy that the insurgent’s only recourse is to portray it as particularly damaging to civilians. Arkin’s point is that U.S. commanders do not have to hold the assumption that airpower is more damaging than other elements of force and that insurgent fighters still retain a responsibility when using civilians as shields. As part of a proper information strategy, this point needs to be emphasized by U.S. commanders in the media. The attitude that airpower causes undue damage is emphasized in FM 3-24 when it states, “an air strike can cause collateral damage that turns people against the host-nation (HN) government and provides insurgents with a major propaganda victory.”<sup>5</sup>

While it is certainly true that air attacks can—and do—cause civilian casualties, FM 3-24 overlooks the fact that other forms of lethal force cause damage that is even more significant. In a study on the invasion of Iraq, Human Rights Watch noted that in most cases, “Aerial bombardment resulted in minimal adverse effects to the civilian population.”<sup>6</sup> In the same report, the organization observed that Army uses of force caused significant civilian casualties. This is not to suggest that the Army was negligent in its use of force, but reflects the reality that close contact operations are just as dangerous for the civilian population—and as damaging to the hearts and mind campaign—as airstrikes.

By voicing concerns on the use of airpower, and not expressing the same concerns for other elements of military firepower, FM 3-24 inappropriately focuses on weapon systems rather than effects. Major General Dunlap of the U.S. Air Force contends that the manual’s reliance upon a “boots on the ground” approach actually increases the risk of incurring the exact type of civilian casualties most likely to create the adverse operational impact normally attributed to airpower. The Haditha incident—

damage; however, the manual ascribes the greatest risk to the wrong source. According to Dunlap, “if avoiding the most damaging kind of ‘collateral damage’ is as important as FM 3-24 claims, then *reducing the size of and reliance on the ground component is the way to do it, not by limiting airpower* [emphasis in original].”<sup>7</sup>

It is not surprising after reading FM 3-24 that ground commanders fail to appreciate airpower’s essential contributions to the COIN effort. The lack of sound operating concepts for integrating airpower into COIN doctrine has concrete consequences for the overall COIN effort. One battalion commander admitted that, in his first few months in Iraq, he “rarely put air into my plan—this was because we did not understand how it could assist us in a counter insurgency fight.”<sup>8</sup> RAND analyst Benjamin Lambeth, in his analysis of the use of airpower in the initial Afghanistan effort, notes that the lack of understanding of airpower advantages is endemic in the Army. According to Lambeth, leading Central Command leaders were “insufficiently appreciative” of what the Air Force could do, leading to excessive collateral damage constraints, unnecessary bombing, and

## **The Haditha incident**—where numerous civilians were wantonly killed by ground forces that had just come under insurgent attack—highlights the risks when young soldiers are in close contact with a hostile population.

where numerous civilians were wantonly killed by ground forces that had just come under insurgent attack—highlights the risks when young soldiers are in close contact with a hostile population. FM 3-24 is rightly concerned about collateral

distorted targeting.<sup>9</sup> Strategically, the misunderstanding of the use of air assets let fleeing targets escape while increasing the danger to coalition ground forces. Air operations supporting the near disastrous Operation Anaconda in

Afghanistan provide a telling example. Seymour Hersh, in *Chain of Command*, illustrates that Army leaders mistakenly thought that they could do the operation on their own and took little consideration of how airpower could provide assistance.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the air component was introduced to the planning process very late and was not permitted to conduct major preparatory strikes, nor was it afforded sufficient time to move air assets to support the large-scale operation. Even though air assets can be moved rapidly, the Air Force was not aware of the scope of the operation and therefore ran out of aircraft during the operation. Integrated planning from the onset would have ensured that sufficient air resources were tasked and available to support the operation. The consequence was an operation where key Taliban escaped, and numerous ground forces were killed or injured, due to lack of air support.

**Airpower Advantages.** The main advantage of using airpower in a military operation is that its speed and flexibility allows fewer troops to physically be on hostile ground, providing a smaller intrusive footprint and allowing a larger area to be controlled by a given ground force. This aspect of airpower has two advantages for a COIN strategy. First, it minimizes the presence of foreign troops with the host nation population. Airborne surveillance, combined with rapid strike capability, makes it difficult for insurgent forces to move in large numbers or to mass on a target without detection. This allows friendly forces to patrol in small numbers or be stationed in isolated villages without risk of being overwhelmed by a large insurgent force.<sup>11</sup> The recent strikes against al-Qaeda havens

south of Baghdad illustrate how small concentrations of coalition forces could interdict al-Qaeda forces.<sup>12</sup> Air strikes were used as a means to deliver precise firepower, limiting the exposure of both friendly troops and the local population. Airpower not only allows a smaller footprint in the host nation, but the range and flexibility of air assets allow them to support commanders in multiple theaters with the same assets, reducing the number of U.S. military required in the theater. Aircrafts such as B-1s and U-2s stationed in the Persian Gulf region routinely support operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan, providing commanders strike and reconnaissance capability with fewer forces, while the Air Force unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) platforms such as the Predator and the Reaper support the theater with the bulk of the manpower stateside. Air Force UAV pilots, sensor operators, and intelligence “fly” their weapon system from Creech Air Force Base in the Nevada desert using intercontinental data links. Effective use of airpower assets permits a smaller footprint in the host nation while providing a large security capability.

The second advantage of airpower in a COIN operation is that it gives the U.S. strategic “staying power” by reducing the potential for U.S. military casualties, which erodes support for the COIN domestically. Rory Stewart, in a recent *New York Times* op-ed, argues bluntly that the U.S. COIN strategy exceeds national will—“American and European voters will not send the hundreds of thousands of troops the COIN textbooks recommend, and have no wish to support decades of fighting.”<sup>13</sup> The current national debate reflects the public’s cost benefit analysis regarding the COIN in Iraq. The large deployment of ground troops is limited

by concerns for the health of the Army and the political consequences for a long-term deployment. Unlike a large deployment of ground forces, airpower has considerable staying power because of

activity in that area. These missions are highly effective, and if planned in advance, provide a preventive non-lethal deterrent capability.<sup>14</sup> Air assets are also used to provide infrastructure protec-

## **With the current generation** of targeting pods and small explosive munitions, aircraft can, and often do, target these insurgents in the act, protecting critical infrastructure.

its relatively low cost, its low visibility to the public, and because it limits enemy opportunities to inflict U.S. casualties. The enforcement of the no-fly zones over Iraq illustrates the staying power of airpower. U.S. and coalition airmen successfully enforced the UN-mandated no-fly zones over Iraq for more than 11 years without losing a single aircraft. This is not to argue that airpower can “go it alone”—ground forces would still be an essential element of any strategy—but rather proffers a strategy whose costs are more in line with the sacrifice Americans are willing to make.

**Airpower is More than Airstrikes.** Although airpower often makes the headlines when it strikes insurgent strongholds in Iraq or Afghanistan, it routinely supports coalition ground troops in nonlethal ways. Nonlethal innovations—such as showing force, providing airlift, facilitating medical evacuation, and providing surveillance capabilities—often prove more useful and effective than airstrikes, particularly in the context of a COIN operation.

One nonlethal innovation is the “show of force” in which strike aircraft fly at a low altitude over potentially hostile areas in order to discourage adversary

tion. Rather than patrolling the skies in benign orbits, waiting for a ground support requests, fighter aircraft routinely fly over critical infrastructure such as pipelines and power lines providing a deterrent protection to infrastructure that is critical to reconstruction. With the current generation of targeting pods and small explosive munitions, aircraft can, and often do, target these insurgents in the act, protecting critical infrastructure.

Air Force mobility capabilities also give commanders an advantage over insurgents by moving necessary forces rapidly over great distances. Airlift provides a significant advantage to COIN forces, enabling commanders to rapidly deploy, reposition, sustain, and redeploy ground forces. While ground forces can execute these basic missions alone, airlift bypasses weaknesses that insurgents have traditionally exploited. For instance, responding to the threat of roadside bombings and ambushes of U.S. ground convoys in Iraq, the Air Force, in November 2004, sharply expanded its airlift of equipment and supplies to bases inside Iraq in order to reduce the amount of military cargo hauled over land routes. This effort kept more than 400 trucks and about 1,050 drivers with

military escorts off the most dangerous roads in Iraq. Innovations in airdrop technology allow airlifters to resupply ground units without putting the aircraft or ground units at risk. Ground units in remote areas of Afghanistan are being resupplied through Joint Precision Air Drop System (JPADS) airdrop missions. JPADS combines a low-cost guided parachute system with GPS integration, allowing very accurate high altitude airdrops, keeping the aircraft out of harm's way while accurately supplying isolated units. Resupplying troops by air in remote locations takes vehicles off dangerous roads, thereby avoiding the threat of accidents, improvised explosive devices, and insurgent ambushes.

A key element in ensuring that U.S. losses are minimized is the robust aeromedical evacuation system. Aeromedical evacuation allows for the rapid transport of injured personnel and civilians, not only shrinking the critical time between injury and focused medical care, but also reducing the footprint of medical facilities within the host nation. During the Vietnam War, the average time for the injured to be transported from the battlefield to the United States was forty-five days. Today all services use medevac helicopters to move injured patients to forward-based trauma centers, while the Air Force typically moves these patients from Iraq and Afghanistan to major medical centers in Europe and the United States in three days or less. In addition to the obvious benefits that medical evacuation provides to U.S. military personnel, it provides further advantages in a COIN operation. Medical evacuation of host nation military or civilians can also build good will among the population and create a positive message. Saving the life of someone's child or

spouse is "one of the biggest rounds we can fire," says Lt. Gen. Gary North, the top Air Force commander for the Middle East and Southwest Asia. "That's a story they'll tell forever."<sup>15</sup>

Finally, manned and unmanned surveillance systems, such as the U-2, Predator, Global Hawk, and space assets, give U.S. coalition counterinsurgent forces unprecedented capabilities in surveillance and target acquisition. Overhead surveillance fills critical gaps in knowledge, especially when the counterinsurgent force has not gained the acceptance and trust of the local population. Aerial surveillance platforms with long loiter times can place an entire region under constant surveillance visually and electronically. Air surveillance has been particularly useful along isolated border areas where insurgents are tracked, and engaged with airstrikes, when entering Afghanistan. "We find and track the insurgents with our intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and then target them with precise effect," according to Maj. Gen. William L. Holland, U.S. Central Command Air Forces deputy commander.<sup>16</sup> Enhanced awareness from airborne surveillance of enemy operating areas, when combined with other sources of intelligence, increases the number of opportunities for COIN forces to take the initiative. For instance, in Iraq, overhead platforms are used to track insurgents planting IEDs back to their bomb-making network, allowing the whole network to be dismantled.<sup>17</sup> Just as in traditional warfare, an integrated strategy affecting key nodes of the bomb-making network usually reaps greater benefits than attacking the bomb-planters themselves.

**Conclusion.** The particular advantages of airpower—its speed, range, persis-

tence, flexibility, and lethality—make it an integral element of modern COIN operations. Unfortunately, FM 3-24, the current COIN doctrine, presents a ground-focused perspective that limits strategic options compared to a truly *joint* strategy. The Air Force must take some of the blame for this lack of air strategy in the current document. Writing in 1998, one airpower scholar observed that, “to a large extent, the Air Force has ignored insurgency as much as possible, preferring to think of it as little more than a small version of conventional war.”<sup>18</sup> This lack of interest was reflected in the slow introduction of COIN doctrine. The U.S. Air Force just recently released its primary doctrine document AFDD 2-3, *Irregular Warfare*, incorporating airpower issues directly related to fighting a COIN. The Air Force needs to dedicate additional energy to showcasing its recent doctrinal developments in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and multi-service forums where irregular warfare and COIN concepts are being debated in order to ensure that Air Force perspectives are voiced.

This essay is not a call for an “air only” strategy, but rather a call for the full potential of airpower to be integrated into a more inclusive joint and interde-

pendent COIN doctrine. FM 3-24 is an outstanding work of scholarship and military theory, forming the bedrock of military strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan. The immediate concern, however, is whether the designation of FM 3-24 as the “Book for Iraq” will cement FM 3-24 as U.S. *joint* COIN doctrine. The airpower contributions reviewed here provide a short list of capabilities that should be integrated into a comprehensive strategy for the counterinsurgencies rather than ad hoc supplemental additions. The need for truly joint COIN doctrine is *not* about whether airpower is acknowledged; rather it is about bringing the best of the *whole* armed forces—and the unique capabilities of *all* the services—to bear on our current armed conflicts.

*The author would like to thank Elizabeth Grimm, Tricia Bacon-Gonzales, Sarah Cross, Hamutal Bernstein, John Sawyer, Colonel Keith Hrebenak, and an anonymous reviewer for their edits on draft versions of this article. Additionally, he would also like to thank Major General Charles Dunlap, USAF, whose impassioned arguments for developing a “truly joint” attitude towards counterinsurgency greatly influenced his thoughts on the subject.*

#### NOTES

1 Michael R. Gordon, *Military Hones a New Strategy on Insurgency* (the *New York Times*, 2006, Internet, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/05/washington/05doctrine.html?pagewanted=print> (date accessed: 2 February 2008).

2 FM 3-24’s preface does not describe it as doctrine aimed merely at ground operations but as doctrine for “military operations” in “counterinsurgency environments.” See United States. Dept. of the Army. and United States. Marine Corps., *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual: U.S. Army FM 3-24 : MCWP 3-33.5*, University of Chicago Press ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), vii.

3 William M. Arkin, *In Defense of Air Power* (the *Washington Post* Online, 2007, Internet, [\[blog.washingtonpost.com/earlywarning/2007/12/afghanistan\\\_commander\\\_bombs\\\_li.html\]\(http://blog.washingtonpost.com/earlywarning/2007/12/afghanistan\_commander\_bombs\_li.html\) \(date accessed: 1 February 2008\).](http://-</a></p>
</div>
<div data-bbox=)

4 William M. Arkin, *In Afghanistan, It’s About Air Power, Too*, the *Washington Post* Online, 2007, Internet, [http://blog.washingtonpost.com/earlywarning/2007/12/in\\_afghanistan\\_its\\_about\\_air\\_p.html](http://blog.washingtonpost.com/earlywarning/2007/12/in_afghanistan_its_about_air_p.html) (date accessed: 1 February 2008).

5 United States. Dept. of the Army. and United States. Marine Corps., *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual: U.S. Army FM 3-24 : MCWP 3-33.5*, E-1.

6 “Off Target: The Conduct of the War and Civilian Casualties in Iraq,” (New York; London: Human Rights Watch, 2003), 20.

7 Charles J. Dunlap, *Shortchanging the Joint Fight? An Airman's Assessment of FM 3-24 and the Case for Developing True Joint Doctrine* (Air University Press, 2008).

8 Howard D. Belote, "Counterinsurgency Airpower: Air-Ground Integration for the Long War," *Air and Space Power Journal* 20, no. 3 (2006): 56.

9 See especially Chapter 8, Lambeth outlines persistent problems integrating air operations into a coherent strategy. Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Air Power Against Terror: America's Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2005).

10 Seymour M. Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib*, 1st Harper Perennial ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 137.

11 Alan Vick, *Air Power in the New Counterinsurgency Era: The Strategic Importance of USAF Advisory and Assistance Missions* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2006), 113.

12 Deborah Haynes, *U.S. Airstrike Targets al-Qaeda Havens in Iraq*, 2008, Internet, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/iraq/article3166641.ece> (date accessed: 29 January 2008).

13 Rory Stewart, "Where Less is More," the *New York Times*, 23 July 2007.

14 Marc Santora, "U.S. and Iraqis Hit Insurgents

in All-Day Fight," the *New York Times*, 10 January 2007. "Show of force" missions comprise a large number of the daily total of coercive missions flown, far outnumbering bombing missions. See *21 January Airpower Summary: F-16s Provide Show of Force*, 2008, Internet, <http://www.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123083132> (date accessed: 1 February 2008); *Airpower Summary for 28 January 2008*, Internet, <http://www.centaf.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123084058> (date accessed: 1 February 2008).

15 See Michael M. Phillips, "In Afghanistan, Mercy Missions Are a Part of War; Medevac Helicopters Offer Villagers Services Taliban And al Qaeda Can't Match," the *Wall Street Journal*, 17 April 2007.

16 *Air Assets Support Afghanistan Strike*, 2007, Internet, <http://www.af.mil/news/story.asp?storyID=123037535> (date accessed: 4 February 2008)

17 Marcus Weisgerber, *Air Force ISR 'Backtracking' Helps 'Round Up' IED Makers*, 2006, Internet, <http://integrator.hanscom.af.mil/2006/November/11302006/11302006-17.htm> (date accessed: 31 January 2008).

18 Dennis M. Drew, "U.S. Airpower Theory and the Insurgent Challenge: A Short Journey to Confusion," *Journal of Military History* October (1998): 809.