

The Other Side of the COIN

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Since 11 September 2001, airpower has helped liberate thousands from the iron grasp of Saddam Hussein, the Taliban, and the Islamic State. The prevailing narrative of airpower's role in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) focuses on its core competencies of air and space superiority, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, rapid global mobility, global strike, and command and control. However, throughout these past 17 years, a quiet, frequently unnoticed story emerged. For the first time in Air Force history, Airmen from across Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSC), have equally shared the burden of combat with their aircrew brethren. Indeed, these nontraditional Airmen have seen as much, if not more, combat than their rated counterparts. General Purpose Force (GPF) Airmen have tackled a wide variety of positions in Iraq and Afghanistan: from leading provincial reconstruction teams to rebuilding the Iraqi and Afghan Air Forces and numerous jobs in between. In fact, these Airmen provide the Air Force with its most experienced counterinsurgency (COIN) cadre in its short history.

This expertise, however, could quickly atrophy as the DOD refocuses on the “re-emergence of long-term, strategic competition” against Russia and China.¹ Although terrorism will continue to be one of the top priorities for the DOD, if history is any guide, the Air Force may easily dispose of its hard-fought experience as it embraces its historical focus on conventional conflicts. Moreover, the Air Force is likely to be involved in irregular warfare (IW) environments in future near-peer battlefields, like in western Ukraine and in Syria versus Russia's “little green men,” and, thus the need for GPF Airmen will endure past fights against terrorists. Accordingly, the Air Force should heed the advice of its most talented officers, who have filled Air University's Muir S. Fairchild Research Information Center with scores of papers on COIN and IW that focus on air advising, the need for a COIN doctrine, and a host of other issues, to ensure that history does not repeat itself.²

Firstly, the Air Force must write a COIN doctrine. Although the Air Force has recently updated its IW and foreign internal defense (FID) doctrine, the USAF needs a COIN-specific doctrine to help train and guide future Airmen, who remain in Iraq and Afghanistan, assisting host nation forces repel a resilient insurgent force. Secondly, the Air Force should leverage its crop of air advisors by finally expanding its air advising mission. Lastly, the Air Force must begin to celebrate its small war heroes and legends, like Lt Col John Loftis and Maj Gen Edward Lansdale, respectively. These stories will educate Airmen on their service's proud COIN heritage,

while also reminding senior leaders that their service is filled with Airmen who fought side-by-side with their Army and Marine Corps brothers-in-arms in some of the most dangerous battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Not Your Father's Air Force Anymore

The Air Force has always been a technologically-focused service that overwhelmingly concentrates on conventional conflicts. RAND analyst Carl Builder famously quipped that the service worships “at the altar of technology.”³ Although other services rely on the technology, the Air Force often promotes the idea that technology can transform warfare, leading some to label the service as “Technology R Us.”⁴ During the last 17 years, the service ushered in a new era of airpower when a MQ-1 Predator conducted its first combat sortie that narrowly missed killing former Taliban emir, Mullah Omar, on 7 October 2001.⁵ Indeed, the Air Force often makes news when deploying new weapons, like the recent use of the GBU-43/B, the “mother of all bombs,” against an Islamic State underground network in Eastern Afghanistan.⁶

However, a different era quietly began in 2003 when the Joint Staff tasked the Air Force to send Airmen to Iraq to assist the Army in convoy duties. This initial “in-lieu-of” task of approximately 300 Airmen mushroomed to almost 8,000 Airmen annually, who filled a wide array of billets, ranging from detainee operations to combat medics attached to Army maneuver units.⁷ In 2008, the Air Force began calling these billets *joint expeditionary taskings* (JET) to characterize the combat nature of these joint assignments. These Airmen went through intense predeployment training, where Airmen qualified on crew-serve weapons, completed cultural and language training, and learned how to spot improvised explosive devices.⁸ Although these Airmen were under administrative control and operational control to Air Force commanders, Army commanders exercised tactical control of these unconventional Airmen. Thus, JET Airmen not only had to adapt to working with their Afghan and Iraqi allies, but also had to adjust to an Army culture that was radically different than their own. And while not all of these JET Airmen conducted missions “outside-the-wire,” thousands did.⁹

In the last 17 years, the Air Force witnessed the birth of its longest advisory mission. On January 2004, the Coalition Military Assistance Training Team (CMATT), stood up a small air cell, subsequently, known as CMATT-A, in Baghdad. This CMATT-A gave way to the Coalition Air Force Transition Team (CAFTT) that began the gargantuan task of rebuilding the dilapidated Iraqi Air Force in earnest.¹⁰ Similar efforts in Afghanistan began in 2006, when US Air Forces Central Command, set up a similar CAFTT-like organization to stand up the Afghan Air Force (AAF).¹¹ Since these efforts began, thousands of GPF Airmen have deployed to rebuild two war-ravaged nations' air forces. The mission continues today as air advisors in Afghanistan under Train and Advise Command—Air (TAAC-A) assist on improving the AAF's effectiveness on numerous platforms. In Iraq, air advisors under the newly established Coalition Aviation Advisory and Training Team have boosted their counterparts' proficiency in operations that devastated the Islamic State.¹²

The need for air advisors in Iraq and Afghanistan was the partial impetus behind the creation of the Air Advising Academy (AAA), in March 2007. The AAA, which is

officially under the Air Force Expeditionary Center, became fully functional in early January 2013 and can train 1,500 Airmen annually. Although air advising is often synonymous with combat aviation advising, more than 75 percent of Airmen who attended AAA come from nonaircrew career fields, underscoring the fact that air advising isn't synonymous with combat aviation.¹³ The creation of the 571st and 818th Mobility Support Advisory Squadrons highlights the necessity for advising in career fields outside of aviation. These two squadrons, who are under the 621st Contingency Response Wing at Joint Base McGuire–Dix–Lakehurst, New Jersey (the same location as AAA), have 300 air advisors with 30 different skill sets with a mission focus on Latin America and Africa, respectively.¹⁴

Separately, in April 2006, as the service became engulfed in two raging insurgencies, the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC) was created at Air University (AU) to boost Airmen's cross-cultural competence. In a little more than a year, the AFCLC was charged with culture and language training across the Air Force, resulting in the creation of the Language Enabled Airmen Program (LEAP) in 2009.¹⁵ More than 2,400 Airmen are currently enrolled in the program that educates and trains Airmen in more than 90 different languages. "LEAPsters" (the moniker for the Airmen enrolled in LEAP) participate in language intensive training events for up to six weeks in various countries designed to hone their language and cultural competency skills. They are often prime candidates for such units like the 571st and 818th MSAS and the 6th Special Operations Squadron (6th SOS), as well as the Air Force's foreign air officer program. While AFCLC and LEAP were not designed explicitly for COIN, their creation was born from such conflicts, and underscores how far the service has come in developing these nontraditional skill sets.

The abovementioned vignettes are a mere sampling of the Air Force's newfound COIN prowess. There are other units across the Air Force with similar experience with stories yet to be written. Regardless, these Airmen, and the institutions that helped educate and train them, provide the Air Force with a deep reservoir of COIN expertise that it must properly harness.

An Often (Intentionally?) Neglected Skill Set

Although the Air Force has made great strides in the past 17 years, it has a long history of consistently sidelining its small war expertise. The Air Force boasts a proud, small war heritage that dates back to the use of the 1st Aero Squadron to help Gen John J. Pershing disperse rebel forces under Francisco "Pancho" Villa. Although the strategic bombing campaigns in Europe and the Pacific are some of the most cherished moments in American airpower history, World War II also marked the birth of airpower in support of special operation force (SOF) operations. The 1st Air Commando Group focused on "air drops, short field landings, evacuations, resupply and strike missions" in the Pacific theater.¹⁶ Unfortunately, budget cuts following World War II reduced the unit to only three wings. Following the Korean War, only two squadrons remained focused on unconventional warfare, and by the beginning of Vietnam, the USAF did not possess a single unit specifically dedicated to fighting small wars.¹⁷

The Vietnam War saw a significant increase in USAF's irregular war expertise, although this, too, would decrease as senior leaders—yet again—turned their attention back to the conventional fight after the war's ignominious end. President John F. Kennedy was the impetus behind the creation of the 440th Combat Crew Training Squadron (“Jungle Jim”) in 1961, as the president insisted that the DOD better prepare for fighting communist revolutionaries. Jungle Jim was expanded to become the 1st ACG and the following year the Air Force created the Special Air Warfare Center at Eglin AFB, Florida. Legendary Airman Col Harry “Henie” Aderholt aptly led these renegades out of Nakhom Phanom Royal Tahri Air Base, Thailand during the Vietnam War. His belief in the utility of low-technology platforms in COIN ran counter to Seventh Air Force commander Gen William Momyer, who successfully sidelined Colonel Aderholt. Despite Colonel Aderholt's and his Air Commandos' accomplishments, Air Force SOF was deactivated in 1974, as the Air Force and the entire DOD began to cleanse itself of Vietnam—a move that many inside the defense community clamor for today after decades spent in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁸ Although Air Force SOF had a rebirth in the 1980s, the Air Force has consistently sidelined and marginalized its COIN Airmen to its detriment. Time and again, the Air Force has had to reinvent its COIN prowess despite having a rich history in these conflicts. Although Air Force Special Operations Command is now a permanent fixture, conventional Air Force units and the service's burgeoning cyber and space units receive the vast majority of resources.

Despite the Air Force's penchant for sidelining this skill set, there's reason to hope that the service will now begin to harness its recent experience. Although the USAF sacrificed mightily in Vietnam and watched the rise of protracted revolutionary warfare after World War II, only a smattering of Air Force officers wrote about airpower's role in COIN. Most Airmen were focused on nuclear weapons and conventional airpower to blunt the mighty red menace, the Soviet Union.¹⁹ However, this is no longer the case. Although most officers remained focused on traditional aspects of airpower, students at Air Command and Staff College, the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, and Air War College have written hundreds of papers on their experiences in COIN. From leveraging airpower for airbase defense in COIN to branding security forces as the USAF's COIN force, USAF officers have written eloquently and passionately about their experiences in an attempt to nudge the Air Force into a more proactive stance.²⁰ Unfortunately, many of these ideas remain lost in the library. However, two topics in particular—the need for an USAF-specific COIN doctrine and for an expansion of the 6th SOS' footprint—deserve to be removed from the shelf, re-explored, and harnessed to cement the last 17 years of experience.

The Missing Doctrine

Although the voices from Maxwell AFB offered a wide array of ideas, the plea for an Air Force COIN doctrine is a repeated line found in many papers.²¹ Indeed, an article in the Spring 2006 edition of *Air & Space Journal* made a convincing argument for an Air Force COIN doctrine.²² Unfortunately, the Air Force has long side-stepped addressing these conflicts. Air Force doctrine in the 1950s was mute on low-intensity conflict or guerrilla warfare.²³ In 1967, however, with the service heavily involved in

Vietnam, the Air Force published Air Force Manual 2-5, addressing Special Air Warfare.²⁴ Unfortunately, this new manual was not the start of a new trend, and by the end of the 1970s, COIN had disappeared from doctrine. The Air Force would remain virtually silent on COIN until 1992 when it published its first doctrine on FID that addressed many aspects of COIN.²⁵ This FID doctrine addressed operational COIN issues, like the use of airpower for mobility and intelligence, which was not a standard subject in airpower doctrine.²⁶

The Air Force, however, has recently made significant strides in addressing this void in doctrine. In 2007, it published Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 2-3, *Irregular Warfare*, to address airpower's role in Iraq and Afghanistan.²⁷ In the introduction, this operational level doctrine explicitly states, "irregular warfare is not a lesser form of traditional warfare," marking a significant change in the service's view of such conflicts.²⁸ AFDD 2-3 spends time discussing COIN and its 10-page appendix, "Understanding Insurgencies," adequately introduces Airmen to the complex subject of insurgency and counterinsurgency. However, it fails to distinguish between COIN, FID, UW, terrorism, and counterterrorism. In fact, Airmen would be excused if they thought these terms were interchangeable.

Also in 2007, FID doctrine received a significant boost with a notably revised edition of AFDD 2-3.1, *Foreign Internal Defense*.²⁹ AFDD 2.3-1 replaced a 2004 version that the initial air advisors in Iraq found lacking. These advisors struggled mightily without adequate doctrine and largely succeeded through trial and error, initially.³⁰ Regardless, this revised version focuses on the importance of a light footprint approach, the utility of GPF Airmen, and the broad range of missions air advisors can play. Moreover, it acknowledged the significant role that FID was playing in both Iraq and Afghanistan and in the wider GWOT.³¹

Both FID and IW receive prominent attention in current doctrine. Annex 3-2 *Irregular Warfare* (2016) does a better job than its predecessor in distinguishing between the various aspects of IW. In fact, it cautions practitioners that each "IW engagement is unique" and thus a thorough examination is needed "before developing a strategy."³² The almost 40-page document covers a wide range of topics, ranging from IW fundamentals to C2 in IW campaigns. Similarly, Annex 3-22, *Foreign Internal Defense*, includes a variety of FID issues, and—like its predecessor—AFDD 2-3. The annex also covers relevant topics in COIN, like Mao's three-phase insurgent strategy.³³

Despite these impressive steps to fix a gaping hole in doctrine, the USAF still needs to write its own COIN specific doctrine. It should be titled Annex 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, to mirror both joint and Army doctrinal publications of the same numerical titles.³⁴ There are numerous reasons to have a stand-alone COIN doctrine. Firstly, with a COIN-specific doctrine, the Air Force would send a clear signal to its Airmen and sister services that it is serious about COIN, despite its penchant for technology and conventional conflict. While the service has also conducted other forms of IW, it has spent almost two decades mired in COIN and has the lessons learned to address COIN specific problems. Secondly, it will prepare future Airmen for COIN, as well as those already embroiled in these conflicts. As mentioned above, air advisors remain in both Iraq and Afghanistan and will be for the foreseeable future to assist our allies in extinguishing a resilient insurgent force.³⁵ A COIN doctrine will help future Airmen in Iraq and Afghanistan and their commanders

understand the “right way to organize, train, equip, and sustain forces” in a COIN fight, while also providing a blueprint for how to shape the AAF and Iraqi Air Force’s (IqAF) mission focus too.³⁶ Lastly, a broad range of AFSCs play a prominent role in COIN. This is different than other forms of IW, like CT and UW that tend to be more SOF-specific. Thus, a COIN doctrine, unlike other forms of IW, will be more beneficial for more AFSCs.

More importantly, there are still holes in Air Force IW/FID doctrine, Joint Publication (JP) 3-24, and Field Manual 3-24 that could be filled. For example, “culture” is mentioned less than ten times in Annex 3-2 and Annex 3-22 combined. Although “the role of culture” receives more prominent attention in basic doctrine, the importance of it must be underscored, especially in a COIN-specific doctrine.³⁷ The Air Force should leverage the AFCLC’s recent AU Language, Regional Expertise and Culture Symposium’s focus on the concept of “cultural agility” and its importance for *Air Force Future Operating Concept 2035*, which focuses on operational agility.³⁸ As the US pivots to focus on Russia and China, it will be imperative that its Airmen are able to be “flexible and adaptable in inter-cultural interactions” with partners and allies so as to act as a bulwark against both adversaries’ expanding influence.³⁹ In short, being cognizant of culture is important, being able to operate in culturally unique landscapes that require flexibility is paramount.

Separately, the benefits and pitfalls of airpower in COIN need further exploration. JP 3-24 focuses a little more than two pages on air operations in COIN.⁴⁰ A COIN-specific doctrine should leverage little known case studies, like the successful use of American airpower in assisting the El Salvadorian Air Force during its 11-year COIN campaign, to highlight successful COIN operations.⁴¹ This little known campaign receives a short, 30-word vignette in current IW doctrine.⁴² A new COIN-specific doctrine must delve deeper by focusing on the tendency of counterinsurgents to utilize airpower that are “inordinately physical in their approach to a predominantly non-physical phenomenon,” hindering the “goal of gaining and maintaining popular allegiance and legitimacy (to the government).”⁴³

This new doctrine must also address the various jobs Airmen can fill in COIN. While airpower is undoubtedly tied to the skies, Airmen have also contributed to the joint ground fight. If the Air Force has learned anything these past 17 years, it is that Airmen can adapt to new battlefields and tough jobs traditionally outside their scope. For example, the new doctrine should explore the role that security forces have in COIN, specifically in support of offensive ground operations, like the 2005 Operation Desert Safeside in Balad Air Base, Iraq.⁴⁴ This brief offensive operations against insurgent forces who were peppering Balad AB with indirect fire, underscores the utility of leveraging GPF Airmen for jobs traditionally given to the Army. Moreover, the use of airpower to defend bases will continue to be an attractive option, as the recent fight between Russian mercenaries and the US underscores.⁴⁵ If, as Gen Billy Mitchell believed, that only Airmen can truly understand airpower, then it is likely that only Airmen can truly understand air base defense.

The Air Force has made some initial steps to harness some of its COIN experience. Buoyed by an experienced cadre of rated and nonrated Airmen who spent almost their entire careers in COIN, AU is overflowing with papers and proposals on how to make the USAF more adept in COIN and IW. The new doctrine codifying

the importance of IW and FID is a nod to the work Airmen have accomplished since 11 September 2001. However, there is more work to be done. While many voices have asked for a COIN doctrine, even more have argued for an expanded air advisory mission.⁴⁶

Expanding the Air Advising Mission

The Air Force has spent almost two decades helping rebuild the IqAF and AAF. Despite this recent experience, the USAF still only has three squadrons out of almost 3,000 dedicated to training and advising foreign air forces. Thus, approximately 300 Airmen out of 320,000 on active duty—less than 1 percent of the total force—are dedicated to this incredibly important mission. The 6th SOS is the only unit who is focused on combat aviation advising, while the two new MSAS squadrons focus on support roles. Although the 6th SOS began operations in 1994, its lineage traces back to Jungle Jim and the 6th Fighter Group, who supported British guerrilla forces in Burma. The unit, like other similar units in Air Force history, was quickly disbanded after World War II.⁴⁷

The 6th SOS may be the premier combat aviation advisory force, but, shockingly, it was not the first unit called to stand up the IqAF.⁴⁸ Although attempts to stand up the IqAF began with the creation of the CMATT in January 2004, it was not until 22 February 2005, that two 6th SOS training teams arrived to start training the IqAF.⁴⁹ It took almost two years after the invasion of Iraq for the USAF's premier combat aviation advising unit to begin one of the most challenging FID missions in USAF history!⁵⁰

The 6th SOS, while a supremely capable unit staffed with highly trained Airmen who have volunteered to conduct an often-neglected mission, is too small to accomplish its mandate. Squadron personnel interviewed by RAND estimated that they turn down at least 56 percent of all requests for support due to the lack of manpower.⁵¹ The fact that the 6th SOS was not the primary unit tasked to stand up the AAF from scratch is unfortunate. However, one squadron is far too small an organization to tackle such a long-term task. Yet, there have been repeated calls to expand the 6th SOS into a wing (or even a group) to help address such tasks. In 2005, RAND Project Air Force conducted a yearlong study entitled "The USAF's Role in Countering Insurgencies" and recommended expanding the 6th SOS into a wing in the hopes of boosting the Air Force's role in countering insurgencies "without sacrificing the Air Force's edge in major combat operations."⁵²

An expanded 6th SOS could help mitigate some issues inside the AAF. A January 2018 DOD Inspector General report on the AAF found numerous issues with the long-term advising mission, stating that air advisors "were not fully prepared to perform their AAF specific advising mission" because they did not receive adequate training "on the AAF and its relationship to the Afghan National Army" or about the "Afghan military staffing processes and terminology peculiar to Afghanistan."⁵³ Some of these issues were born because creating an AAF was never a pressing priority in the early years of Operation Enduring Freedom. However, the lack of institutional memory also hindered this long-term effort.⁵⁴ New advisors need time to learn a complex mission in a foreign culture while simultaneously rebuilding a new force from scratch in the midst of an industrial strength insurgency in an often-

opaque culture. Asking them to do all of that while having a more nuanced understanding of the AAF's bureaucratic process is a load too heavy for brand new advisors to carry. An expanded 6th SOS could have dedicated specific squadrons (or an entire group) to this mission. These experienced advisors could have rotated back to the same AAF units in subsequent deployments. During their time back state-side, these advisors could back brief senior leaders on the feasibility of current efforts and also improve training for future air advisors.

Finding qualified Airmen for this assignment is difficult. The 6th SOS has Airmen from across 37 AFSCs, ranging from fixed and rotary wing advisors to health specialists.⁵⁵ Airmen must be experts in their AFSCs and have the ability to instruct host nation security forces in austere conditions. During this four-year controlled special duty tour, Airmen must undergo a rigorous training cycle.⁵⁶ These Airmen undergo a 12–18 month, four-phase training program that focuses on advanced tactical field craft, advisor tradecraft, culture and language training, and AFSC-specific training.⁵⁷ These Airmen must also maintain their language competency throughout their tours. The Air Force could sidestep some of the initial costs and time in expanding the 6th SOS by harvesting its crop of unconventional Airmen. Thousands of Airmen have trained their Iraqi and Afghan brethren in all aspects of the 6th SOS' mission: Indirect Support (e.g., joint exercises), noncombat direct support (e.g., logistics and communication), and combat operations (embedded combat aviation).

The Air Force could leverage its special experience identifiers (SEI) to help identify potential candidates to enlarge this unit. SEIs are numerical codes on Airmen's personnel records that can help flag those with unique skill sets. Currently, the Air Force has SEIs for Airmen who have completed Army Combat Skills Training, graduated from AAA, and were deployed as air advisors, and a LEAP SEI. The Air Force recently created a new SEI intended to identify Airmen with regional expertise and have spent considerable time in these important geographic areas. Airmen with these SEIs would be attractive candidates to fill an expanded 6th SOS, especially if they've shown an aptitude for advising in previous tours overseas.

The Air Force should also study the Army's new efforts in standing up their recently deployed Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs), who are currently advising the Afghan National Army. Although SFABs are in their infancy, the Army's force management director, Brig Gen Brian Mennes, recently stated that the Army would likely create two security force assistance divisions and possibly a corps. SFABs are designed to improve host-nation war-fighting capacity at the lowest tactical level, the same purpose as the 6th SOS' purpose. Their proposed headquarters would likely be tasked with managing, recruiting, and equipping the new SFABs, much like a future air advising wing.⁵⁸

It will also be imperative that the Air Force properly incentivize an expanded advising unit, as assignments with the 6th SOS are "still considered a poor career choice" by many in the Air Force.⁵⁹ In 2016, Chairman of Joint Chief of Staff Gen John Dunford urged the Air Force to address this problem during a visit to Afghanistan, after he visited some air advisors. General Dunford called the training of foreign allies a "core mission" for the Air Force and urged the service to devote more time and resources to this effort.⁶⁰ The Air Force could help mitigate this perception

by creating specialized paths toward in-residence professional military education, as it did to help mitigate the same perception with the AFPAK Hands program.⁶¹

Luckily, the Air Force has the manpower and institutional framework to enlarge their advising footprint. Utilizing SEIs will help identify potential air advisors to fill an expanded 6th SOS. Moreover, with programs like LEAP and institutions like the AAA and AFCLC, the Air Force can create a training pipeline that targets young Airmen with cultural competency and language acumen to expand its advising mission. However, to fill such units with eager Airmen, the Air Force must make a concerted effort in extolling their COIN legends and heroes, so the next generation of Airmen are aware of the service's rich COIN heritage.

Extolling the Air Force's COIN Heritage

Most Airmen are likely unaware that one of America's most legendary military advisors is not a bearded Army special forces officer but is an Air Force intelligence officer. General Lansdale, who also worked for the Central Intelligence Agency and its predecessor, the Office of Strategic Service, was a pioneering figure in guerrilla warfare and played a significant role in assisting the Filipino government defeat the Hukbalahap insurgency. General Lansdale became one of Philippine President Ramon Magsaysay's most trusted advisors and crafted the theoretical underpinning for civic-action programs, a staple program in COIN. Lansdale had less success in his efforts in Vietnam but did play a significant role in ensuring South Vietnam's victory in the 1955 Battle of Saigon, although he could never replicate his success in the Philippines for numerous reasons.⁶² Regardless, this remarkable Airman has been lost in Air Force lore. This is inexplicable and underscores the Air Force's proclivity to forget its COIN heritage.

There are easy solutions available to remedy this problem. The CSAF Professional Reading List is a good place to start. In the past, it has urged Airmen to read such COIN classics as David Galula's *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, Alistair Horne's *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962*, and David Kilcullen's *Accidental Guerrilla*. Missing from these lists, however, are any books specifically on Airmen who participated in COIN or IW. This is partly because so few books exist. Regardless, adding Warrant Trest's *Air Commando One* about General Aderholt and James Corum's *Airpower in Small Wars* would be a good start. The list must also include Max Boot's recent 600-page tome *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam*. These books will help educate the wider force on an often forgotten chapter of its history while hopefully inspiring a new generation of Airmen to follow in their footsteps.

Further, the Air Force must do more to highlight our COIN heroes, like Lt Col John Loftis, an AFPAK Hand who was tragically killed in a Green on Blue attack at the Afghan Ministry of Interior in 2012.⁶³ Colonel Loftis' story was recently highlighted in Steven Coll's new book, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. The former AFPAK Hand was also an Afghanistan regional affairs specialist, who had already completed a tour in Afghanistan on a PRT in Zabul, when he returned to Afghanistan to help advise Ministry of Interior officials.⁶⁴ Before his time as an AFPAK Hand, Colonel Loftis taught Afghan-bound Airmen the

basics of Afghan culture at the USAF Special Operations School, which dedicated an auditorium in his memory. The former Peace Corps volunteer cared for his Afghan counterparts and put the needs and interests of his allies often above his own safety. His name should be etched with other Air Force heroes who fell in combat, too.

AU should also continue to encourage its officers to write about their own COIN experience. Recent books like George Cully's *Adapt or Fail: The USAF's Role in Re-constituting the Iraqi Air Force* portend to a rich, yet largely untapped, area for publication and research. Air War College and Air Command and Staff College students, who earned their chops in the desert, would be an excellent source for primary research. As mentioned earlier, there has been an explosion of research papers dedicated to COIN by AU students. Airpower historians have the opportunity to tap into a largely unexplored field, by chronicling the Air Force's most experienced COIN force in its history.⁶⁵

Cementing Our Hard-Fought Experience

Almost 17 years after the traumatic events of 9/11, the USAF remains engaged in COIN. All too often, "the Air Force, in particular, has tended to ignore and downplay air operations in small wars and in its education and doctrine."⁶⁶ The Air Force must focus on its core competencies against near peer competitors because airpower plays a critical role in existential conflicts. Nevertheless, the Air Force can still focus on its conventional mission while simultaneously harnessing its COIN expertise. Expanding its advisory effort, writing a new COIN doctrine, and extolling its COIN experience would not decrease the USAF's focus on state-on-state conflicts. The Air Force could focus on its core competencies and still allow a small but growing COIN force, which is guided by proper doctrine and inspired by their predecessors, to stamp out brushfire wars before they explode into thornier issues that would require more of the service's limited assets.

The Air Force has the most experienced, battle-tested COIN force in its history. However, this will not last forever, as these Airmen will inevitably retire or separate from the service. This large reservoir of experience will begin to dry up and force the USAF to start from scratch in future nonconventional conflicts. Making a relatively modest investment in cementing the past 17 years of hard-fought experience will ensure future Airmen are prepared for forthcoming conflicts. 🌟

Notes

1. DOD, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office [GPO], 2018), 1, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

2. For a small sampling of the wide array of papers, please see: Maj Anthony Carr, "America's Conditional Advantage: Airpower, Counterinsurgency, and the Theory of John Warden" (thesis, Maxwell AFB, AL: School of Advanced Air and Space Studies [SAASS], June 2009); Maj Arthur Davis, "Back to the Basics: An Aviation Solution to Counterinsurgency Warfare" (research report, Maxwell AFB, AL: Air Command and Staff College [ACSC], April 2005); Lt Col Louis Dupuis, "Achieving an Optimal Medium Altitude UAV Force Balance in Support of COIN operations" (research report, Maxwell AFB, AL: Air War College [AWC], 2 February 2009); Maj Christian Faust, "Back to the Future: Making a Modern Day Air Corps in a 'Stone Age' Afghanistan" (research report, Maxwell AFB, AL: ACSC, April 2010); Maj Samuel Highley, "COIN/PA: Leveraging Military Public Affairs to Fight Insurgencies" (research

report, Maxwell AFB, AL: ACSC, April 2006); Maj David Kincaid, "Convoy Mitigation: A Full Spectrum Approach to Counterinsurgency Logistics" (research report, Maxwell AFB, AL: ACSC, April 2006); Maj Rob Masaitis, "Above the Influence: The Strategic Effects of Airpower in Irregular Warfare" (thesis, Maxwell AFB, AL: SAASS, June 2010); Maj Chris Wallace II, "Airpower Against 'Irregular' Adversaries: How Terrorist, Insurgent, and Guerrilla Forces Have Attempted to Negate Airstrikes" (thesis, Maxwell AFB, AL: SAASS, June 2006); and Maj Zachary Wood, "Airpower in COIN: A Coercive Approach" (research report, Maxwell AFB, AL: ACSC, April 2007).

3. Carl Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Boston, MA: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 19.

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