Te Matataua

The Scouting Party of Air Power

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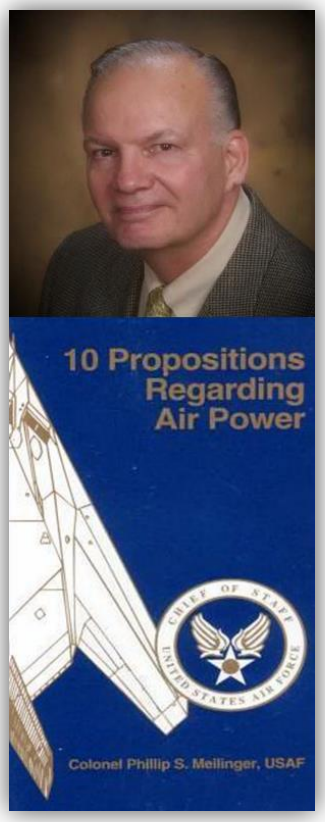
MEILINGER'S 10 PROPOSITIONS REGARDING AIR POWER

"The essence of what airmen believe about air power"

In 1995, the USAF published a booklet designed, in part, to create debate and reflection about the inherent characteristics of air power. Written by Colonel Phillip S. Meilinger, a C-130 pilot and instructor, historian and author of air power related topics, the booklet was titled '10 Propositions Regarding Air Power' and served to encapsulate what was believed to be the essence of air power into a concise and understandable format. In Colonel Meilinger's own words:

"Reading the works of the top theorists—Giulio Douhet, Hugh Trenchard, Billy Mitchell, John Slessor, the officers at the Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS), Alexander de Seversky, John Warden, and others—brought many similarities to light. Even though living in different times, different places, and different circumstances, these men had distilled certain principles, rules, precepts, and lessons that seemed timeless and overarching. Some of these had been demonstrated in war; others were mere predictions. After 75 years, however, I think there have been enough examples of airpower employment and misemployment to derive some propositions—principles would be too grand a term—from the theories."



Colonel P. Meilinger and his '10 Propositions Regarding Air Power'

While written over 20 years ago, from a US perspective and by no means universally agreed with, the 10 propositions are a useful starting point in the study of air power. Meilinger's 10 propositions are generalised as follows:

1. **Whoever controls the air generally controls the surface.** The first mission of an air force is to defeat and neutralise the enemy air force so friendly operations on land, sea and in the air can proceed unhindered, while at the same time one's own vital centres and military forces remain safe from air attack. Friendly air superiority is one of the biggest contributors to effective land operations as ground manoeuvre is very difficult if the enemy controls the air. The need for air cover also extends to maritime operations as naval vessels and supply ships can be vulnerable to air attack. Air superiority is a major influencing factor in achieving a military objective.

2. **Air power is an inherently strategic force.** In the conventional land battle wartime success is achieved when an army defeats an opposing army. Similarly, the Navy fights a tactical battle until control of the sea is gained; whereupon, they can do little more except bombard land targets and facilitate amphibious operations (which is fought on land). Aircraft can fly over armies and navies to strike at a country's key centres. The strategic capability of air power also offers airlift of forces and freight; and overhead surveillance of land and maritime activity.

3. **Air power is primarily an offensive weapon.** Conventional land warfare theorists may consider that defence is the stronger form of war as invincibility lies with a well dug-in defence; where the enemy becomes vulnerable as they expose themselves in attack. Air power comes from all directions making it difficult to anticipate and prepare for an assault. In an air war there is no time for mobilisation, the conflict may be over before a

defensive action can take effect; therefore, air power needs to concentrate on the offensive.

4. **Air power is targeting, targeting is intelligence, and intelligence is analysing the effects of air operations.** An extraordinary variety of air weapons are available for use against targets, and the ability to attack anything does not imply one should strike everything. Air power's ability to attack targets is exceeded by its ability to identify them; therefore, air power and intelligence are integrally intertwined. Intelligence is a strategic resource and is the key to winning a conflict. Analysis of air attacks is equally important as it determines the effectiveness of the attack – but not all attacks involve releasing a weapon, the threat is often enough to achieve the aim.

5. **Air power produces physical and psychological shock by dominating the fourth dimension – time.** Timing can be considered a duration, or as the synchronisation of the actions of multiple units. Air power is the most effective manager of time in modern warfare because of its ability to rapidly advance and produce shock. Physical shock is produced in the face of overwhelming power and it produces enormous psychological strain on the enemy. Speed and surprise can sometimes substitute for concentration of force. However, air power can be limited in irregular warfare as it is a protracted warfighting event. And, if collateral damage is inflicted then the shock value may work against the attacking force.

6. **Air power can conduct parallel operations at all levels of war simultaneously.** The size of an army is usually determined by the size of the enemy's army because the goal is to win the counterforce battle. However, the size of an air force is not dependent on the size of the enemy air force as fighting the air battle is only one of the many missions that air power conducts. Parallel operations occur when different campaigns, against different targets, and at different levels of war are conducted simultaneously. Air power's speed and range allow it to strike targets across the depth and breadth of enemy country, which can paralyse an enemy rather than fight him.

7. **Precision air weapons have redefined the meaning of mass.** Mass or concentration of force at a particular point is a principle of war. Mass dominated land warfare, where planners focussed on improving the means of transportation and communications to ensure mass is available at the right place at the right time. WWII bombers were massed against targets partly for their defence and partly to offset their inaccuracy of bombing. Precision guided weapons reduce the need for massed attacks. Inefficiency of stray bombs impacting dirt, the cost of large aircraft fleets and the political backlash from collateral damage has necessitated a continual improvement in precision weapon technology. Precision is also critical during relief operations where supplies are air dropped as close to those in need as possible.

8. **Air powers unique characteristics require it to be centrally controlled by airmen.** Soldiers and sailors speak solemnly about the years of experience that goes into training a surface commander, thus making it impossible for outsiders to understand their art. Yet they all feel capable of running an air force. Airmen must take a broader view of war because capabilities they command have effects at all levels of war. Air power can quickly intervene over an entire theatre, regardless of whether it is used for strategic or tactical purposes. Tough decisions regarding prioritisation have to be made by people who understand air power.

9. **Technology and air power are integrally and synergistically related.** Air power is the result of technology and depends on the latest advances in aerodynamics, electronics, materials, and computer technology. The synergistic relationship with technology underpins an airman's culture.

10. **Air power includes not only military assets, but an aerospace industry and commercial aviation.** A collection of airplanes does not equal air power. Government initiatives, funding and private businesses generate air power, and helps to instil 'airmindedness' in the people of a nation. The cost and complexity of military aviation requires a national plan to sustain air power.

Note: '10 Propositions Regarding Air Power' by Colonel P. Meilinger can be found on the APDC intranet page for NZDF personnel, or for the public via an internet search engine.

Key Points

- **Meilinger's propositions are a useful starting point for the study of air power**
- **The 10 propositions contrast the roles of an army and navy with that of an air force.**
- **Air power can influence all levels of war simultaneously.**

APDC Update

The APDC is accepting papers and essays for the 2018 edition of the RNZAF Journal. Contributions from members of the NZDF and the general public may be sent to ohapdc@nzdf.mil.nz.