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Fifty Questions for Doctrine Writers

Means Are As Important As Ends

MAJ GEN I. B. HOLLEY JR., USAFR, Retired*

LET ME BEGIN with a historical analogy. Early in his career, when he served as a congressman from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln was confronted with the necessity of voting for or against the declaration of war against Mexico in 1846. Ever the high-minded idealist, he voted against declaring war. It was, he said, an immoral land grab. His constituents thought differently. They saw the war as an ideal opportunity to expand the territory of the United States. So they voted him out of office.

Lincoln never forgot that lesson. He came to realize that idealism must always be tempered with realism and practicality. He came to realize that the workable way was a case of "eyes on the stars, feet on the ground." During the Civil War, for example, he wanted to

*I wish to acknowledge the contribution of my former graduate student, Maj Robert Taguchi, USA, who propounded a checklist for doctrine writers at my urging, which I found helpful in preparing this article.

free the slaves. But when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, he excluded all those slaves held in states such as Maryland, which sided with the Union. Lincoln needed the votes and the manpower of those states to wage war effectively against the Confederacy. So the Emancipation Proclamation was a compromise. In the eyes of many abolitionist critics, it was a seriously flawed document—a sellout. The only slaves it "freed" were those behind the Confederate lines—the very ones the Union forces didn't yet control. But as we now know, though flawed and compromised, the proclamation worked.

The ends we seek are implicit in the means we use.

What am I trying to say here? The means we employ when we undertake to formulate doctrine are every bit as important as the ends we seek. The ends we seek are implicit in the means we use. That is one of the fundamental philosophical principles that undergird this great republic in which we live. I repeat: the ends we seek are implicit in the means we use.

I have devoted much of my professional life in the Air Force to the quest for suitable air doctrine. I have written books and articles for this purpose. It now appears that my efforts have been without much success, for we are still groping for a better path to sound doctrine. Our procedures for devising doctrine at all echelons are still far from ideal. Look about you. Do we anywhere have a comprehensive set of instructions to guide those people who are assigned the difficult task of producing Air Force doctrine?

I propose to ask a series of searching questions to help those people who are launching a new doctrinal center at Air University. First, what should we ask about the composition of the team—the officers selected to formulate doctrine for the Air Force? What past experience and education uniquely qualify them for this duty? In prior assignments, have they given evidence of creative imagination? Have they demonstrated a capacity for rigorous evaluation of conflicting evidence? Does the doctrine team reflect an adequate spectrum of experience to cope with the whole range of potential Air Force capabilities?

Next, are doctrine writers employing adequate procedures in gathering evidence on air-arm experience in order to formulate sound doctrine? Do they cast their research net widely enough? Do they survey the fullest possible range of after-action reports and similar sources from the field? If after-action reports are a primary source of air-arm operational experience, have doctrine writers taken steps to insure that the scope and quality of such reports are adequate for doctrinal purposes? Are after-action reports as objective as they ought to be? In the view of this observer, very little is currently being done to enhance the quality of such reports and the regularity with which they are submitted.

Has the doctrine team comprehensively studied the experience of foreign air forces? Has it guarded against the bias that arises from relying only on those reports of foreign experience and practice which have been translated, while ignoring contrary evidence which happens not to have been translated? Has appropriate account been taken of cultural or material differences underlying foreign experience and practice when weighing the utility of foreign doctrinal ideas?

What can we learn from the ways and means employed by foreign air forces in formulating doctrine? Has our doctrine team ever undertaken any systematic effort along this line? Do foreign air forces have procedural manuals or regulations on the formulation of doctrine that might offer us insights on their methods, if not their doctrines? In recent years, I have been much impressed with the way the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) has grappled with the problem of doctrine. A small air force with limited funding, the RAAF has been driven to think deeply about doctrinal issues. Has the USAF studied this source in depth?

Before publishing USAF official doctrine, what steps should doctrine writers undertake to test the validity of their formulations? Have they launched "trial balloons" in the

form of journal articles to elicit feedback? How successful is the practice of holding symposia in developing new or revised doctrine? Does the current practice of circulating drafts to the Air Force major commands (MAJCOM) for comment elicit constructive replies? Do the MAJCOMs evaluate proposed doctrine comprehensively? Or do they respond critically only when some vested interest of the command seems threatened? Has the doctrine team undertaken a systematic survey of knowledgeable individuals to supplement the written record of after-action reports and other such evidence? Has it been at pains to interview individuals at all echelons—not just senior officers—to secure the widest possible perspective on a given body of experience? What steps should be taken to prepare interviewers to elicit objective evidence? Are the interviewers sensitive to the danger of asking, wittingly or unwittingly, leading questions that elicit the answers desired—answers that conform to their presuppositions? Do doctrine writers have adequate funding to permit the travel that might be required to elicit the kind of testimony needed—especially that of junior participants with actual operational experience?

Have doctrine writers paid appropriate heed to support functions, or have their efforts been almost exclusively devoted to operational concerns? Doctrine applies to logistics as well as tactics. Do we have suitable logistical doctrine? Do we have suitable research and development doctrine? At a time when preserving the industrial base is an acute problem, what guidance can doctrine suggest? This nation has experienced earlier and even more drastic reductions in defense spending that have savaged the industrial base. What generalized experience from such past history can inform our doctrine writers today?

When doctrine writers assess success or failure in past operations, do they ask if flawed performance or faulty doctrine led to failure? Can extant doctrine be effectively evaluated without a conscious awareness of many other factors that may have contributed to success or failure? Will the same or similar "other factors" be present when our current doctrine is applied?

What have been the sources of significant doctrinal innovation in the past? Will a study of such patterns of innovation lead to a prompter development of appropriate doctrine? Because technological advances are a major factor in forcing doctrinal revision, what procedures should doctrinal writers establish to insure an adequate response to "on the horizon" technologies?

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Given that all thinkers and writers are subtly influenced by their assumptions, wittingly or unwittingly, what steps should doctrine writers take to insure that their assumptions are valid? Should doctrine writers reach outside their immediate organization to invite critical evaluations of their assumptions to avoid parochial bias? Should some such outside critics be drawn from the other military services or even foreign services?

Beyond probing our assumptions, what steps should the doctrine team take to test the validity of its formulations? Beyond feedback from various Air Force echelons, what actual field testing should be undertaken in peacetime via maneuvers, exercises, and the like? Have the doctrine folk established effective liaison with such ongoing operations as Red Flag? Should doctrine writers solicit high-command support for more far-reaching testing of key doctrinal formulations?

Should our doctrine team give thought to what is now often referred to as asymmetrical hostile actions? Does the Air Force have a valid role in counteringterrorism? If so, then surely we must spell out suitable doctrine for dealing with such threats. And what about nonviolent terrorism or economic mischief making? In 1995 a Russian hacker in Saint Petersburg broke into Citicorp's computerized

cash management system in New York and capriciously transferred $12 million to various banks around the world. The Russian police cooperated with the FBI in apprehending this scoundrel, but what he did may have been a blessing in alerting us to the potential for such nonviolent acts of terrorism.[1] I'm not convinced that the Air Force has a role or a responsibility in confronting such threats. I mention them only to suggest that our doctrine writers must decide what threats require a doctrinal response.

What generalized experience from such past history can inform our doctrine writers today?

Have our doctrine writers given adequate attention to the means by which doctrine is promulgated or disseminated? Are doctrine manuals the best way to communicate doctrine? Do manuals as now conceived employ the most effective format?[2] What alternative or supplemental means of promulgating, communicating, or distributing doctrinal ideas might we employ to insure greater circulation and penetration within the officer corps?

Today the Air Force is much concerned over cooperating with people engaged in developing joint doctrine. To what extent does human nature operate to inhibit the successful application of joint doctrine? All military organizations need to achieve cohesion—the bonding of members in a given service. But such bonding tends to generate a "them versus us" outlook, which is detrimental to jointness. Does our Air Force organizational culture thus adversely influence the practice, if not the words, of joint doctrine?[3]

Can writers of joint doctrine overcome the inherent differences which exist, for example, between the ground-arm perspective and the air-arm perspective? Whereas the ground folk stress coordination, we stress flexibility. As my friend Roger Spiller of the Army Command and General Staff College once asked, Is the search for joint doctrine "a continuing process of negotiation and reconciliation between interests" the object of which is "the triumph of one over the other"? Can we devise ways to overcome this parochial service rivalry? Must those people who negotiate joint doctrine always regard concessions as "giving up the farm"—a surrender of control? Does the personality of individuals who negotiate the formulation of joint doctrine make a critical difference? If so, what considerations should enter in the selection of such negotiators?

One might go on proliferating a hundred more questions of the sort I have already posed. But now let me consider other approaches to the problem of improving the ways we generate doctrine. Gen Donn Starry, one of the ablest thinkers of the Army, now retired, a dozen or so years ago wrote an article entitled "To Change an Army," which offers some provocative guidelines that should be of interest as we go about developing a new approach to doctrine writing.[4]

General Starry, who toward the end of his career headed the Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), asked, "What are the factors required to effect change?" This I take to mean, "What does it require to introduce significant new doctrine?" This he follows with a checklist which strongly suggests that promulgating doctrine involves far more than publishing a manual. Let's look at the steps he offers:

- There must be an institution or mechanism to identify the need for change, to draw up parameters for change and to describe clearly what is to be done and how that differs from what has been done before.
- The educational background of the principal staff and command personalities responsible for change must be sufficiently rigorous, demanding and relevant to bring a common cultural bias to the solution of problems.
- There must be a spokesman for change. The spokesman can be a person, one of the mavericks; an institution such as a staff college; or a staff agency.
- Whoever or whatever it may be, the spokesman must build a consensus that will give the

new ideas, and the need to adopt them, a wider audience of converts and believers.

- There must be continuity among the architects of change so that consistency of effort is brought to bear on the process.
- Someone at or near the top of the institution must be willing to hear out arguments for change, agree to the need, embrace the new operational concepts and become at least a supporter, if not a champion, of the cause for change.
- Changes proposed must be subjected to trials. Their relevance must be convincingly demonstrated to a wide audience by experiment and experience, and necessary modifications must be made as a result of such trial outcomes.[5]

We would do well to reflect on these suggestions as we build the new doctrinal center at Air University.

Finally, I want to turn from the doctrinal writers and their problems of procedure and organization to consider the recipients—the readers and users of doctrine. Do Air Force officers understand what doctrine really is? Do they know what the intended use of doctrine is? Does the Air Force in its whole system of professional military education (PME) ever explicitly instruct officers in the proper use of doctrine? I suspect not, when we hear a senior flag officer asserting that doctrine is "bull crap."

Can we improve our PME to achieve a better understanding, Air Force wide, of what doctrine is and is not? Surely this should be one of the initiatives of the new doctrinal center. Doctrine is not and was never meant to be prescriptive. Doctrine is suggestive. It says, "This is what has usually worked best in the past," but this in no way frees decision makers from the need to form their own judgment in any given situation. If the study of war tells us anything, it is that the only constant is war's inconstancy—that it is filled with surprises, contingencies, and unknowns.

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We have seriously neglected educating our officers in how to read doctrine and how to use it. Well-educated officers must engage in a critical intellectual activity, with the doctrinal options available to them. Doctrines are not a series of universally valid maxims or positive prescriptions. They are points of departure for the thoughtful decision maker, who must judge each situation individually. When we say doctrine is "authoritative," all we mean is that it is objectively recorded experience that remains worthy of and requires the critical attention of the decision maker.

Notes

1. Timothy L. Thomas, "Deterring Information Warfare: A New Strategic Challenge," *Parameters* 26, no. 4 (Winter 1996–1997): 81.
2. Maj Gen I. B. Holley Jr., "A Modest Proposal: Making Doctrine More Memorable," *Airpower Journal* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 14–20.
3. R. S. Parkin, "The Goodwill of the Services and the Problems of the Lesser Partner: The Creation of the Australian Manual of Direct Air Support, 8 June 1942," Paper no. 42 (RAAF Base Fairbairn: RAAF Air Power Studies Centre, March 1997).
4. Gen Donn A. Starry, "To Change an Army," *Military Review* 63, no. 3 (March 1983): 20–27.
5. Ibid., 23.