



# **Airpower, Afghanistan, and the Future of Warfare: An Alternative View (CADRE Paper No. 25)**

*USAF, Craig D. Wills, Lieutenant Colonel*

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It is helpful to view current applications of American airpower in two operational mediums. On the one hand, aircraft and tactics have provided a high certainty of air superiority against enemy fighters. On the other hand, American airpower has reached new levels of effectiveness with night-and-day, allweather, stealth, and precision bombing sustained with surprisingly sensitive surveillance-and-reconnaissance capabilities for target identification and battle damage assessment. The enforcement of the “no-fly zones” over Iraq, known as Operations Northern and Southern Watch, during the 1990s—as well as the wars in Bosnia, Operation Allied Force in 1999; in Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001; and in Iraq, Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003—highlighted the singular effectiveness of airpower to predominate in some joint and combined forms of war. Lt Col Craig D. Wills examines this rather new application of airpower in the long-running history of direct support of ground combat operations—an activity long declared by thoughtful Airmen as doctrinally unsuitable for airpower. Now it seems that this air support to the ground forces can be considered a core mission function. How times have changed. Wills argues that the twentieth-century argument between air and ground proponents has changed significantly since the Gulf War, and it comes down to the relative importance of the ground or air in the mix. It is more than just using air as a supporting component to the ground forces—if this is true, current force organization and employment is adequate. However, if the air predominates in combat operations, then, as Wills puts it in his first chapter, joint operations doctrine needs to be rethought. A changed balance “will affect the military at every level . . . force structure, organization, weapons acquisition, doctrine, and training” (p. 3). Notwithstanding the blunt commentary from ground proponents, Wills offers that airpower has come to dominate air/ground relations. This is demonstrated, he says, by three factors. First, no adversary can mass without great destruction by precision-strike airpower; second, this lethality is the most politically attractive weapon in America’s arsenal because it is discriminate; and third, this is doubly attractive because it is so inexpensive, especially for political leadership. In several chapters, the author explains why airpower is so different in the twenty-first century, showing how airpower has changed land combat. The most dramatic illustration is the new combination of air, special forces, and local or indigenous troops that can, in many instances, defeat larger and better-equipped forces. This kind of “force intensification” preserves combat power and American lives. Such a remarkable increase in the capability of airpower changes the dynamics of American warfare and therefore needs to be recognized in doctrine and force structure. *Airpower, Afghanistan, and the Future of Warfare: An Alternative View* was written as a master’s thesis in the 2004–05 class for the Air University’s School of Advanced Air and Space Studies (SAASS), Maxwell AFB, Alabama. Colonel Wills’s study was chosen as one of the best of its group. The College of Aerospace Doctrine, Research and Education (CADRE) is pleased to publish this SAASS research as a CADRE Paper and thereby make it available to a wider audience within the US Air Force and beyond.

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