

The Soft Side of Airpower

John W. Bellflower

Air power must be more than force because the problems of the world must increasingly be addressed by the military with more than force.

–Carl Builder¹

We are quite good at killing, we Americans. We have melded technology and the taking of life to such an extent that the process can be, for us, a quite antiseptic experience. This is especially true in the realm of airpower. However, the next, i.e. post-Iraq, phase in the war on terror will more closely resemble humanitarian-style interventions in fragile, failing, and failed (F3) states than Iraq-style invasions. Consequently, operations are likely to call less for the elimination of life than for the preservation and facilitation of life. As we begin to contemplate this next phase in the war on terror, which will likely call for heavy involvement in Africa, we should heed the words of Lieutenant General Stephen Lorenz, who counsels airmen to “challenge accepted paradigms to propose new ways of fighting from air, space, and cyberspace.”² To that end, we should be mindful of the fact that kinetic effects are not always the most desired effects when intervening in F3 states. Indeed, if the Air Force seeks to play a more meaningful role in any post-Iraq engagement, it must look for novel ways of contributing to the global counterinsurgency fight. It must, as former Air Force Secretary Michael W. Wynne indicated, “offer the nation a *flexible mix* of capabilities that allow it to act in a world of growing strategic uncertainty.”³

Contrary to the advice of General Lorenz and Secretary Wynne, most articles discussing the employment of airpower in irregular warfare⁴ often adhere to a myopic view of airpower that considers only what airpower can do to the enemy. Although these articles do indeed discuss such operational functions as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) or airlift, they typically do so only in the context of putting steel on target or assisting ground forces in doing the same. This enemy-centric focus causes many airpower advocates to champion the lethal application of airpower to the near exclusion of its non-lethal aspects. Indeed, this enemy-centric airpower focus has also infected Army thinking as its new counterinsurgency manual devotes merely a single sentence to population-centric airpower.⁵ However, the focus in irregular warfare is typically on influencing the population rather than destroying the military capability of the enemy.⁶ Certainly irregular warfare will sometimes require killing bad guys, but tailoring the airpower effort to the people would demonstrate that airpower offers much more to the irregular warfare fight – much that is typically ignored. In facing the challenges presented in F3 states, America in general and its Air Force in particular must rely less on lethal methods of war

in favor of a soft form of airpower that seeks to defeat the enemy prior to engagement through preemptive population influence.

Dispensing with business as usual and employing a soft airpower approach to preempting terrorism and insurgency will assist in avoiding the largely reactionary method of combating terrorism that has been used in the past. This will permit positive and proactive steps to “sell” the United States’ brand by assisting target populations in meeting basic needs. Using airpower in this fashion can prevent terrorism from gaining a foothold in the world’s desolate and impoverished regions rather than simply awaiting its rise before moving to counteract it. Additionally, employing soft airpower to address the immediate needs of a subject population will assist the United States in accomplishing its goals in the war on terror without resorting solely to the kinetic methods that, rightly or wrongly, engender so much vitriolic debate and hinder our efforts.

The Future Threat

The ascendant threat today is a totalitarian ideology grounded not in the secular philosophies of fascism or communism but in the perversion of religion.⁷ Unfortunately, that threat was not fully realized until the tragic events of September 11, 2001. This watershed event in American history crystallized the understanding that our struggle now is not with armies and fleets, but with embittered individuals imbued with a false sense of religious duty and a hatred for globalization. These individuals have evolved into a pansurgency, i.e. “an organized movement of nonstate actors aimed at the overthrow of values, cultures, or societies on a global level through the use of subversion and armed conflict, with the ultimate goal of establishing a new world order.”⁸ An easily identifiable center of gravity for this pansurgency is the potential sanctuaries offered among the poverty, disease, and instability prevalent in F3 states.⁹ Thus, President George Bush was correct in 2002 when he acknowledged that “America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones.”¹⁰ Therefore, despite the possibility of the emergence of a peer competitor and the concomitant opportunity for full-scale conventional war, the conclusion of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan is not likely to end America’s small wars participation; the war on terror will surely require American intervention in other F3 states.

Whether a state is fragile, failing, or failed is dependent upon its place within a spectrum of instability. A failed state is a country in which the central government has lost effective control over its own territory to the extent that it cannot provide for the basic humanitarian and security needs of its population. As a state’s ability to maintain control or provide necessary services erodes, it moves from simply being fragile to being completely failed.

Although the threat from F3 states is a global phenomenon, it is especially acute in Africa where poverty, lawlessness, disease of almost pandemic proportions, and the absence of robust infrastructure have combined to create vast ungoverned or semi-governed regions that are ripe for becoming terrorist havens and recruiting grounds. According to one study, in the two years prior to the establishment of Africa Command (AFRICOM), 29 of the 53 countries within that command have either witnessed insurgent or terrorist attacks or are home to one or more insurgent or terrorist movements.¹¹ Indeed, the 2007 Failed States Index, a compendium of

indicators of instability that ranks states according to several social, economic, and political indicators demonstrates that twelve of the top twenty states within the critical category are in AFRICOM's area of responsibility.¹² Ten additional African countries are listed as being in danger of failing. The remaining states within AFRICOM, except South Africa which is listed as stable, fall within the borderline category. These rankings demonstrate that nearly all African countries have indicators of instability, such as acute poverty, disease, human rights abuses, poor or non-existent economic development, and a failure of law and order. Thus, Africa is ripe for becoming a sanctuary for terrorism and lethal airpower alone is an insufficient tool for creating the stability necessary to avoid this from happening.

Soft Airpower and its Role in F3 States

In the field of international relations, soft power refers to the ability of a nation to use its culture, political values, and foreign policy to attract and persuade others to adopt its goals.¹³ It is contrasted with the hard power of military might and economic policies designed to achieve a desired result through coercion (or sometimes bribery). Merging the concept of soft power with airpower, however, results in something a little different. Soft airpower is a mechanism by which military skill sets can be used to achieve the same goals of traditional soft power. Soft airpower, then, is the use of airpower to meet the human security needs of a target population. By refocusing our airpower effort, to an extent, on constructive uses that meet the human security needs of a particular target population rather than on destructive uses that could drive that population into the arms of the terrorist movement, or at least cause them to remain ambivalent, we can demonstrate the illegitimacy of that movement and increase support for the counterterrorist effort. In other words, we can trade kinetic effects for magnetic effects.

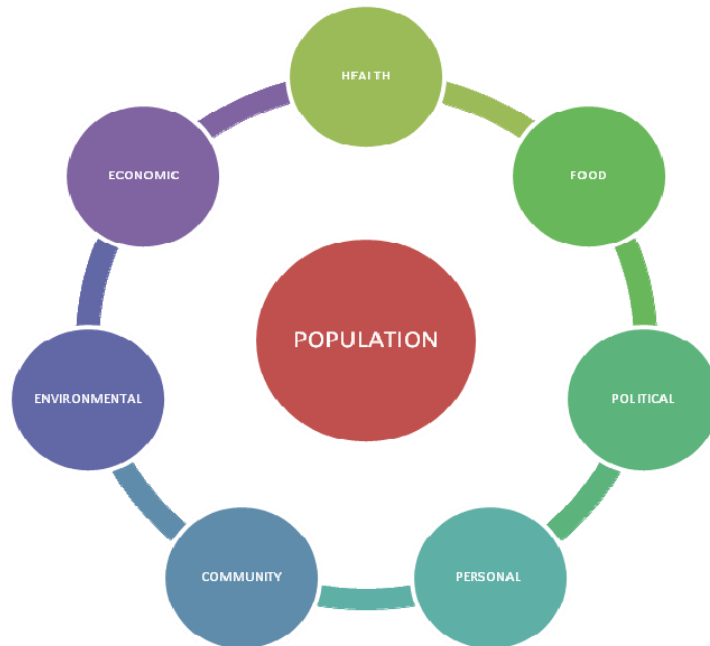
While kinetic effects are produced to subdue an enemy, magnetic effects are those that seek to attract a target population and persuade them to co-opt our goals and thereby remove a potential breeding ground for terrorism. These magnetic effects can only be had through the use of soft airpower; hard, or lethal, airpower never attracts, it coerces or repels by killing. In a counterinsurgency environment, the fight is for legitimacy in the eyes of the majority of the population, thus killing does not work. In almost every case, the population is composed of a minority for the insurgent's cause and a minority for the government's cause. The goal, then, for counterinsurgent forces is to be accepted as legitimate by the uncommitted majority.¹⁴ This legitimacy can be gained through the provision of human security. Thus, soft airpower is not about killing people and breaking things, but rather healing people and building things. Given the threat that will surely occupy our future, the melding of airpower and humanitarian and security skill sets is imperative to ensure strategic success.

Air Force Doctrine Document 2-3, *Irregular Warfare*, states that the main objective in irregular warfare is governmental legitimacy which "ultimately rests with influencing the perception of the relevant population and often is a function of the government's ability to maintain security while addressing valid grievances of that population." In F3 states, particularly those within Africa, those "valid grievances" consist of the central government's failure to address the population's human security needs. What is needed is a dedicated wing possessed of the skill sets necessary to assist a parent government in meeting the immediate human security needs of its population. Fortunately, the Air Force possesses a number of valuable skill sets that are

crucial to the establishment of human security in an F3 environment. Combining these skill sets into an air mobile, mission-tailored unit would give America the capability of fielding an expeditionary unit skilled in conflict prevention through social reconstruction.

The countries in which terrorism could gain a foothold contain vast areas that are poverty-stricken and lawless. The common denominator within these areas is the absence of human security for the local population. At the macro level, human security, according to former UN secretary general Kofi Annan, consists of freedom from fear and freedom from want.¹⁵ It is typically viewed as an aspect of foreign policy that is to be used in conjunction with, and is complimentary to, national security. Although this concept as a policy may be too ambitious for a military that merely executes foreign policy rather than establishes it, adopting a human security paradigm as a counterinsurgency strategy could generate positive effects in the war on terror, particularly within AFRICOM. Adopting this as a counter-pansurgency strategy is necessary because the absence of human security is a strong indicator of state instability. State instability, in turn, is indicative of a weak central government and it is within these weak states that terrorism often seeks to carve out a sanctuary since states experiencing political unrest, insurrections, or economic failure often provides fertile ground for terrorist organizations to exploit.¹⁶ Addressing human security needs restores the legitimacy of the central government thereby “forcing terrorist groups to operate in hostile territory [that] will significantly hamper their freedom of action, perhaps to the point of paralysis.”¹⁷ To successfully attack this strategic center of gravity, i.e. potential terrorist sanctuaries, a strategy designed to address human security is needed. Given its global reach and persistence, airpower is uniquely qualified to address these concerns.

Human security traditionally consists of seven distinct elements of security: economic, environmental, political, community, personal, food, and health.¹⁸ Although airpower cannot hope to completely satisfy all of these elements, with proper focus airpower can set a human security foundation that follow-on, inter-agency forces can build upon. It is imperative, however, that this strategy not be viewed in a linear or sequential format. Indeed, as the chart below indicates, the interrelatedness of the several human security elements are such that the satisfaction (or failure to do so) of one can lead to the satisfaction (or failure to do so) of another. As foundational success in each element is met, a figurative defensive barrier is built around the population that operates to insulate that population from the influences of terrorist/insurgent groups. As in all defensive perimeters, its overall structural integrity relies upon the structural integrity of the many elements; satisfying and maintaining these elements is a continual process that must be of paramount concern to the counterinsurgent force. The persistence of airpower helps to achieve the needed continuity of action necessary to maintain this human security defensive perimeter.



From a human security standpoint, the prerequisite to overall success is constant – without meeting the population’s need for physical security, long-term stability is doomed to failure.¹⁹ An inability to satisfy this precondition often “provide[s] almost perfect laboratory conditions for those who would hatch terror plots and recruit and train terrorists, as well as finance and manage global terror operations from a safe distance.”²⁰ Physical security is the protection from physical violence and it is directly related to both the personal and community elements of human security. Personal security consists of “protecting people from physical violence, whether from the state, from external states, from violent individuals and sub-state actors, from domestic abuse, from predatory adults, or even from the individual himself (as in protection from suicide).”²¹ Community security is the protection of “people from loss of traditional relationships and values and from sectarian and ethnic violence.”²²

The provision of personal and community security requires a collaborative effort of ground combat forces, Air Force Security Forces personnel, and judge advocates. Ground combat forces, of course, would provide the overall security necessary to ensure protection from the threat of violence from organized combat forces, whether originating internally or externally. They would also be used as necessary to maintain the territorial integrity of the F3 state in question and prevent the resumption of armed conflict. However, physical and community security requires much more and ground combat troops are typically not trained in the policing skills that are of critical need in establishing law and order. Rather than approach a law and order situation in a failed state environment with “a blunt instrument” more in tune with kicking down doors and “capable only of imposing a most basic, rigid form of order,”²³ these environments require something more like the knock and announce standard used by domestic law enforcement.²⁴

The skills needed to establish law and order mission in a failed state environment is one of true police skills coupled with the ability to prosecute and house criminals. These skills would include proficiency in “high-risk arrests, evidence collection and preservation, a thorough

understanding of how the police function fits into the larger rule-of-law sector and particularly how it works with the judiciary,” the ability to conduct fundamentally fair trials, and the capability to house the convicted.²⁵ Utilizing Air Force Security Forces as part of a law enforcement package satisfies this criterion since this force is currently used in a law enforcement capacity. Security Forces personnel act as the main law enforcement agency on Air Force installations and are often required to investigate crimes, provide testimony regarding their investigation in courts-martial, and maintain an active confinement facility. The addition of judge advocates in judge, prosecutor, and defense counsel roles would round out the law and order component. These attorneys, as well as security forces personnel, could work closely with their host-nation counterparts, when possible, to establish an effective judicial system that is compliant with internationally recognized norms thereby establishing the legitimacy of the counterinsurgent force and/or host-nation government.

After physical security is established by satisfying the personal and community elements of human security, food and health needs will be of paramount concern. In meeting these needs, soft airpower returns to its roots in the Berlin Airlift by delivering and distributing the supplies necessary to sustain life while inter-agency forces organize for more long-term support. However, soft airpower can do more than simply deliver and distribute aid. The Air Force currently conducts a biannual medical exercise on the African continent known as MEDFLAG that typically consist of a team of doctors, dentists, technicians, and support personnel that deploy to a specific location to provide short-term health care to the local population. This program could serve as an ideal foundation for meeting the health element of human security. For example, the program could be expanded to include a larger, centrally located field hospital unit that could serve a number of dispersed clinics. The clinics could be staffed with a doctor, nurse, and technician and have the capability to treat relatively minor wounds and ailments, provide immunizations, teach preventive medicine techniques, and handle minor medical emergencies. The field hospital would be capable of performing all types of surgeries and would provide support to the clinics by dealing with more complicated medical issues.

Once an individual is free from physical harm and relatively healthy, he or she begins to look toward economic security. According to the United Nations Development Program, economic security is the assurance that every individual received a minimum requisite income.²⁶ While this, if even a desirable policy, is outside the scope of the abilities of a military force, soft airpower can lay the groundwork for economic security by providing jobs to the local population by engaging in local construction projects with the assistance of Air Force construction units. In remote areas of the world, particularly Africa, air transport may be the only means of contact to the outside world. The Air Force’s Rapid Engineer Deployable Heavy Operational Repair Squadron Engineers (REDHORSE) could be airlifted into these locations and begin providing support by rebuilding or constructing airfields to permit an open air supply route to that particular location. These airstrips, in turn, would act as conduits for supplying the region with food and healthcare. Construction units could also serve dual purposes in meeting economic and health interests by using their capability to drill water wells and erect needed facilities. Along with other Air Force construction units, REDHORSE could employ local labor to begin building a small infrastructure consisting of clinics, schools, police stations, community centers, or whatever is needed for a particular area. Additionally, these units could repair existing facilities to allow electricity, water, and other needed life support systems to become functional or

construct earthen dams or the like to protect against natural disaster and meet environmental security needs.

The use of local labor in performing these tasks serves many purposes for the local population. A key benefit is that employing young males results in a lower chance of these individuals succumbing to the lure of terrorist group recruiting tactics. Moreover, in addition to the benefits that the actual facilities provide, community members achieve a sense of belonging to the community as they witness, and take part in, the rebuilding of that community. This assists with the community security component of human security by permitting the local population to cement their own community relationships and values. Thus, although a military unit cannot specifically address the community security needs of a target population, its work in other areas of human security can lay the ground work for success in community security.

Political security is perhaps the human security element that may seem the furthest from traditional military functions. However, by addressing the remaining human security concerns, the military allows the local government and other U.S. agencies to focus on this aspect. Laying the groundwork for future political progress can be accomplished with a soft airpower strategy. Along with the aerial delivery of personnel and supplies to meet the other human security elements, judge advocates could be used to plant the seeds of law and order as a way to create an excellent foundation for assuring that a population's basic human rights are protected. As discussed above, judge advocates could work hand-in-hand with local judicial personnel to create a functioning criminal justice system. However, in some cases, a criminal justice system is not enough; many towns and villages may lack needed civil administration. In these situations, military members may find themselves assisting with local government issues.²⁷ With some additional training, judge advocates may be best suited to provide at least some rudimentary assistance in this matter.

Airpower is truly much more than putting bombs on target. In a strategic environment that clings to the mantra of effects-based operations, interventions in F3 states must look beyond lethality. The goal of effects-based operations is to use the full range of military capabilities to achieve a desired strategic outcome.²⁸ To achieve the desired outcome in F3 states, i.e. stability, we must avoid the myopic view of airpower that centers on kinetic effects and rely on airpower's magnetic effects that will contribute directly to the stated objective. As stated recently by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, our "ultimate success or failure will increasingly depend more on shaping the behavior of others – friends and adversaries, and most importantly, the people in between."²⁹ In future interventions in F3 states airpower is most likely to shape behavior when used in a soft form.

Soft Airpower in a Post-Combat Environment

Soft airpower, however, should not be relegated solely to the permissive and semi-permissive environments of F3 states as it has much utility in a post-combat environment. Indeed, one need only review the lessons of Iraq to understand the need for a dedicated effort to address the human security needs of a population in the aftermath of major combat operations. As combat units conclude their operations by toppling a rogue regime, a vacuum of authority exists. The only entity capable, at that moment, of restoring order and authority is the U.S. military. However,

time is of the essence since an intervening force often has only a minimal amount of time, referred to as the golden hour, to establish its legitimacy through the provision of basic services. In emergency medicine the golden hour refers to the first sixty minutes after the occurrence of life-threatening trauma. It is believed that a victim's chances for survival are significantly increased if definitive care is received within the first hour.³⁰ This concept can be equally applied to an environment of government impotency that is typically present when U.S. military forces intervene in a hostile nation-state. In such environments, the golden hour is a pliable measurement of time that begins from the point at which combat operations cease in a particular area, which may last any number of days, weeks, or months depending upon the unique circumstances of the intervention. Just as definitive medical care is the *sine qua non* of victim survival, security and assistance are the indispensable conditions of long-term stability in an affected nation-state. The failure to meet these requirements in the immediate aftermath of an intervention can often jeopardize the chances for mission success. A case in point is Operation Iraqi Freedom. The period immediately following the fall of Baghdad provides an example of how the failure to quickly meet the target population's human security needs can lead to catastrophic consequences.

An Opportunity Lost

Arguably, the golden hour in Iraq began on April 9, 2003. As United States Marines assisted local Iraqis in toppling a massive statue of Saddam Hussein, a message was sent to the world that the old regime was gone. But nothing stood to take its place. Iraq went from a brutal and oppressive, yet effective government to anarchy almost instantaneously. That the U.S. military was ill-prepared to prevent that anarchy is evident from a conversation between two Army Generals. Upon hearing a colleague state that Army doctrine had not prepared him for what happened in the aftermath of the fall of Baghdad, Brigadier General David Fastabend quoted a litany of doctrinal sources to his friend. His fellow general replied that he had read all that doctrine but that upon watching a few Iraqis walk by during the looting with a couch, it never occurred to him that he was going to be the guy to get the couch back.³¹ This failure to stop the initial looting led to more widespread looting that did not end until there was nearly nothing left to loot. When it was over, U.S. forces lost both the initiative and the respect of the populous.

The failure of the U.S. military to stop the looting sowed the seeds of insurgency as the populous realized that the Americans could not or would not protect them. As the looting turned into car-jackings, kidnappings, and murder, a sense of fear gripped Iraq as the populous realized that they were, as one commentator put it, in a Hobbesian society in which life was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."³² This demonstration of the coalition's inability to establish basic security led Iraqis to search for security elsewhere. They found willing providers of security in local militias led by men more concerned with power and sectarian agendas that put them in direct opposition to the goals of the United States and, ultimately, the new Iraqi government. In the absence of coalition legitimacy, insurgent forces such as the Mahdi Army, a Shiite insurgent force led by firebrand Moqtada al-Sadr, immediately moved to consolidate control of areas ignored by coalition forces. This consolidation initially began with the provision of personal and community security by establishing an armed force to repel Sunni attackers and eliminate drug dealers and kidnappers.³³ Soon the Mahdi Army began to emulate Hamas and

Hizballah by laying the ground work for the provision of social services and jobs, thereby meeting health, food, and economic security. The failure to meet human security needs in the immediate aftermath of Saddam Hussein's ouster helped dig a hole from which the United States is only now beginning to escape. When the history of the Iraq phase of the war on terror is written, even an American victory will not gloss over the fact that employing soft airpower could have avoided years of turmoil and bloodshed. Recognizing and addressing the need for such a strategy could prevent future operations from sliding into an Iraq-style morass.

Soft Airpower in a First Responder Role

Now imagine this same scenario with a pre-planned human security strategy in place. As ground combat forces clear areas and advance toward their objective, a vacuum of authority is often created. The structure once provided by the defeated enemy force is no longer evident and often the local government has ceased to exist. Thus, in the immediate aftermath of battle, a cleared area is often marked by rampant lawlessness, revenge killings, civil disturbances, poor food supply, and/or inadequate governmental services such as water and electricity. Although ground combat forces are often the only presence on the ground, they are typically not equipped to provide human security. Such circumstances require an ability to field a rapidly-deployable, hybrid force capable of employing a human security strategy.

The same principle discussed above in relation to F3 states also applies in post-conflict environments. As the local population begins to feel the effects of the state erosion brought on by the conflict, there is an opportunity to prevent the rise of terrorism by restoring some element of governmental legitimacy. Soft airpower can restore this legitimacy by taking on a first responder role. Much like a first responder to an accident seeks to stabilize the victim for transport to experts at a local hospital, soft airpower in a first responder role would stabilize the local area through the provision of human security until the area can be turned over to expert, inter-agency forces. Doing so would fill the void left after ground combat troops have defeated the existing government and, perhaps, prevent an insurgency from rising.

Conclusion

On August 29, 2005 one of the greatest natural disasters struck the United States when Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Louisiana coast.³⁴ The effects of the hurricane were so devastating that thousands of people were left homeless and without any recourse for food, health care, or shelter. Indeed, the situation in the immediate aftermath deteriorated quickly into lawlessness and humanitarian disaster. As much of the federal and state government sat on the sidelines paralyzed by bureaucratic inaction, the United States military sprung into action. A combination of soft airpower and Army manpower was able to meet the demand for human security relatively quickly due the expeditionary nature of military power. This effort can be replicated at the national security level to bring hope to desolated regions of the world and thereby defeat terrorism before it is able to take root.

Although some may balk at the idea of pursuing an airpower strategy grounded in human security, in the current war we must not simply think outside the box – we must get rid of the box altogether. The advice of General Lorenz is again helpful here: “Sometimes our

perspectives become too mired in present battles, our references too wedded to established joint and service doctrines, and our willingness to follow promising ideas too restricted by fear of failure.”³⁵ Employing soft airpower can allow the United States to accomplish its goal of defeating terrorism before it even arises or, barring that, at least advantageously preparing the battlefield for any future fight. Given our casualties, and the atrocities committed by terrorists, it is quite easy to pursue a traditional military strategy that uses airpower as a giant flyswatter to go hunting for flies. However, the best way to be rid of flies is to clean up the mess that attracts them. Soft airpower is the strategy for cleaning up that mess.

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² Stephen R. Lorenz, “Air, Space, and Cyberspace Power for the Future,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 4.

³ Michael W. Wynn, “Sovereign Options: Securing Global Stability and Prosperity – A Strategy for the US Air Force,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 2, no.1 (Spring 2008): 6 (emphasis added).

⁴ Irregular Warfare is defined as a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations. IW favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities in order to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will. Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 2-3, *Irregular Warfare*, 1 August 2007, 1.

⁵ Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, 15 December 2006, E-1.

⁶ AFDD 2-3, 3.

⁷ George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2006*, (Washington D.C.: The White House, March 2006), 1.

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¹⁷ *Ibid.*

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²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

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- ²² Ibid.
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