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WHAT IT TAKES

AIR FORCE COMMAND OF JOINT OPERATIONS

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Summary

Since the late 1990s, the Air Force has made deliberate efforts to bolster its ability to effectively command and control air operations. These efforts have resulted in material and organizational changes to the air and space operations center (AOC) and an increase in the capability of the Joint Force Air Component Command (JFACC). At a higher echelon, recurring dissatisfaction with the approach to JTF command has led the Department of Defense (DoD) to call upon each of the services to be capable of fielding JTF headquarters.² To build effective JTF headquarters, commanders, and staffs, the Air Force will have to embark on a program similar to the one it did to build AOC and JFACC.

The Secretary of Defense or a combatant commander chooses JTF commanders. JTF headquarters plan and execute campaigns at the operational level of war. They take guidance from strategic-level authorities and combatant commanders and use it to shape missions. Then they allocate available means to undertake these missions. JTF headquarters, then, have two basic functions: planning and oversight of operations.

² U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, Washington, D.C., September 30, 2001, pp. 33–34; Donna Miles, “Core Elements Improve Crisis Response, Combat Ops,” *American Forces Press Service*, March 23, 2006; U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, Washington, D.C., February 6, 2006a.

Of all the services, the Army is most frequently called upon to provide the core of JTF headquarters.³ Air Force units have led at least 15 JTFs since 1990, but these have generally been rather small-scale noncombatant evacuations and humanitarian relief operations. The potential for air power to play larger roles in future conflicts suggests that the Air Force may need to be considered more often to lead future joint combat operations.

The Air Force should be prepared to supply JTF headquarters to the joint force when appropriate. It should identify and prepare units for this role. Operations that might best lend themselves to command by an airman might include those that are dominated by the use of land-based aircraft or those that take place across long distances. Likewise, Air Force personnel generally should not be considered for operations in which the predominance of forces are supplied by the Army, Marine Corps, or Navy. Of course, in many cases the choice of command will not be clear cut. By doing the best it can to generate competent commanders and staffs, the Air Force can be a more effective joint player, and it can better serve the nation.

This monograph surveys how the other services and other selected DoD organizations consider the issue of command and how their initiatives compare to similar efforts in the Air Force. We find that staffs balance between two different types of work: employment and management. We also find that staffs tend to be organized around one of two principal concerns: time and function. The Air Force will need to consider these factors as it considers its approach to the organization of future headquarters.

To help understand some of the issues involved in creating and operating JTF headquarters, this monograph examines four different JTFs. Two of them—JTF–Atlas Response (JTF-AR) and Combined Support Force (CSF)-536—were humanitarian operations, and two—JTF–Southwest Asia (JTF-SWA) and JTF–Noble Anvil (JTF-NA)—

³ By *core of JTF headquarters*, we mean the commander and key elements of the headquarters staff. For the headquarters to reach full functionality, it needs to be augmented with additional staff from both the host service and the other services.

were combat operations. Two of them—JTF-AR and JTF-SWA—were led by Air Force units.

To create JTF headquarters, the Air Force must build them by selecting and molding commanders and staffs. It must also prepare to lead JTF headquarters by identifying the missions they may be assigned, by exercising commanders and staffs, and by engaging likely partners. In addition, the Air Force must execute or actually operate the JTF headquarters by building and maintaining partnerships, manning the headquarters, issuing orders, gaining and maintaining situational awareness, orchestrating efforts, and assessing and adjusting operations.

This analysis raises a number of questions for the Air Force including the following:

- Should Air Force JTF headquarters separate or combine employment and management tasks?
- Should Air Force JTF headquarters organize around time or function?
- When should Air Force units form the core of JTF headquarters and how many types of JTF headquarters does the Air Force need?
- How many JTF-capable numbered air force headquarters should the Air Force field?
- How would the Air Force simultaneously provide air component staffs and JTF headquarters?
- How should the Air Force staff JTF headquarters positions?
- How would the JTF headquarters incorporate other services and non-DoD partners?

Lastly, this monograph makes some suggestions for how the Air Force can increase its ability to form JTF headquarters. These recommendations fall under three categories: systems, people, and processes.

Systems

Acquire the necessary systems (pp. 65, 70) to send and receive information from fielded forces in the air, in space, at sea, and on land.

Determine the desired degree of “reach back” (p. 39). Assess which tasks may be best accomplished from a distance and how the forward command center will incorporate inputs from stations based in the continental United States. Determine how much *reach back* is necessary, possible, and desirable.

People

Reward those with deep experience in joint, interagency, and multinational operations (pp. 65–66). If the Air Force wants its C-NAFs to be capable of JTF leadership, it should provide incentives for officers to gain experience in working with partners outside the Air Force. By ensuring that officers who have spent more than one tour with other organizations are, in general, promoted at a rate equal to or above that of others, the Air Force can send a message that it seeks to develop well-rounded officers who have gained specific knowledge about military operations in other domains and about how other organizations work and more general lessons about how to establish effective working relationships with non–Air Force personnel.

Reorient professional military education (p. 85). Place more emphasis on planning in the curricula of key schools.

Assign competitive people to Air Force Forces (AFFOR) staffs (pp. 66–67). If the Air Force wants its C-NAFs to be capable of JTF leadership, and if it decides to staff JTF headquarters with AFFOR staffs, it needs to ensure that AFFOR staffs are populated by competent and respected personnel.

Train AFFOR staffs (pp. 66–67). Develop a training program to help staffs prepare for both AFFOR and JTF roles.

Processes

Designate JTF-capable organizations (pp. 75–76). In consultation with the designated C-NAFs and their respective combatant commands, the Air Force should specify general mission areas that C-NAF should be capable of undertaking.

Institute exercise programs (pp. 42–47, 68). Such a step would increase readiness for JTF headquarters duty and demonstrate this capability to combatant commanders.

Place more emphasis on planning (p. 70). Settle on an Air Force approach to operational planning that is applicable to both the air component and JTF headquarters roles, and teach this approach at Air Command and Staff College and at other appropriate venues.

Write a directive on Air Force JTF operations (p. 65). The directive would need to lay out how the Air Force as an institution and how individual AFFOR staffs would build JTF headquarters capability, and would task different Air Force entities to help make the vision of an Air Force JTF headquarters into a reality.

Learn JTF headquarters processes (pp. 69–72). Those who lead and man JTF headquarters need to know how to request forces from other services and how to issue formal orders to non–Air Force personnel.

Create the capability to deploy headquarters (pp. 24, 44). Other services have this capability, which the Air Force, in some cases, may need to replicate.

Create a champion for Air Force command (pp. 36–40). A recognized advocate for the key function of command would help to ensure that it is represented in debates over how to allocate resources.