

AIR UNIVERSITY

HERITAGE, IMAGE AND IDENTITY:
THE EVOLUTION OF USAF LEADERSHIP

by

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Biography

Doug “Stoli” Nikolai is an US Air Force Colonel and student at the Air War College at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. In 2003, Colonel Nikolai earned his MBA from Tourou University International, San Diego, California and in 2004, earned a Masters degree in National Security and Decision Making from the Naval Post Graduate School, Monterey, California. He is a career F-16 Viper pilot and USAF Weapons Instructor Course graduate with over 2,700 flying hours including 450 hours of combat time and 622 hours of instruction.

Colonel Nikolai was previously the commander of the 22nd Fighter Squadron (The Big 22) at Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany where he also served as the Director of Staff for the 52nd Fighter Wing. Other past assignments include: 11th Air Force/Alaska NORAD Region as the 611th Air Operations Squadron Director of Operations; Headquarters Air Warfare Center as the Chief of Tactics and Analysis; and F-16 Division Commander at the 422nd Operational Test and Evaluation Squadron. Colonel Nikolai’s combat experience include three tours in Operation SOUTHERN WATCH as the 13th EFS Weapons and Tactics Officer; and two tours during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM – 2003 as the CAOC’s Time Sensitive Targeting Operations Cell Chief, Prince Sultan Air Base, Saudi Arabia and in 2009 as the Commander, 22nd Expeditionary Fighter Squadron under the 332nd Expeditionary Fighter Wing, Joint Base Balad, Iraq.

Introduction

“But such sensations were the prerogative of a handful of exceptional men who willingly risked the dangers of flight. How could these pilots not be different from other men; heroes who stood head and shoulders above the humdrum mass?”¹

- Alexander Korda’s “Conquest of the Air”

The heritage, image and identity of the United States Air Force (USAF) was cultivated from the heroic exploits of American aces born forged from aerial dog fights of World War I (WWI). This celebrated pilot heritage and image became ingrained as pilot exploits were heralded in the US media and the identity of the fledgling air service reached new heights. Not to be outdone, strategic bombing advocates such as General “Billy” Mitchell and “Hap” Arnold further developed USAF’s identity in the quest for its independence. American pilots were held in great esteem by an admiring public, and were equally successful in dominating US military aviation leadership positions, as exemplified by General Henry “Hap” Arnold, the first Chief of the Army Air Forces and its Commanding General during World War II².

Since its designation as a separate service on 18 September 1947, the USAF has been led by pilots as reflected in its top position - the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF). The paper characterizes basic foundations of USAF leadership by the common thread of *air-centric heritage, image and identity*, and defines four USAF Leadership Watersheds since the creation of the independent USAF. Although the CSAF has always been a pilot, USAF leadership has progressed as exemplified by the *type* of pilot occupying the CSAF seat.³ This paper examines the historical evolution of USAF leadership since its beginnings as the Army Air Corps to today’s USAF. Prior to 2009, USAF leadership history consisted of two Watersheds that were

¹ Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun*, 21.

² Air Force Association, *Air Force Magazine*, 38.

³ Air Force Historical Studies Office, *Air Force Chiefs of Staff*.

epitomized by bomber pilot elitism and fighter pilot egoism. An in-depth analysis will dissect these eras of USAF leadership and demonstrate commonalities that explain the selection of the first non-fighter pilot CSAF in 26 years, which marks the beginning of the 3rd Watershed in USAF leadership evolution. A concluding synthesis provides recommendations on how the USAF can position itself for future leadership success throughout this 3rd Watershed and into a 4th Watershed in tomorrow's increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) 21st century environment.

Heritage, Image and Identity

The USAF gained its independence as early air power advocates forged a distinct identity and fostered an image that separated themselves from the other services by highlighting Airmen's successes and contributions during the World Wars. WWI fighter pilot aces were championed across the nation, and the WWII strategic bombing campaign over Europe was proclaimed as the force that shortened the war and the key to the Allies' victory over Nazi Germany.⁴ This WWII flying heritage was reinforced in the Pacific theater with the daring exploits of the Doolittle Raiders and the historic precedent of the first atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.⁵ These accomplishments were highly celebrated and enshrined in the chronicles of USAF heritage as the Air Corps gained its independence from the Army.

USAF flying heritage was advanced in the development and actions of Strategic Air Command (SAC) and its iconic leader, General Curtis LeMay as the US entered the Cold War. Correspondingly, the Korean and Vietnam conflicts reinforced the USAF flying-centric heritage as aces like Bong, Olds and Jabara became part of USAF lore. Moreover, the Gulf War reasserted the might of air power when it was successfully applied as prescribed by USAF

⁴ *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey*, February 1947.

⁵ *The Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima*, August 6, 1945.

Colonel John Boyd, the architect of the “Patterns of Conflict” theory that caused the Iraqi Army to surrender by the thousands.⁶ Finally, the “War Over Kosovo” added gravitas to USAF heritage and its decisive airpower doctrine after 78 days of escalating aerial coercion drove Serbia to the peace table.⁷

The first 50 years of USAF *heritage* was visibly flying-centric with notable events featuring pilot endeavors. This flying- and pilot-centric heritage is reflected by the names of US air bases: Luke, McGuire and Creech are just a few of the 60 out of 64 major active duty bases named after famous American pilots.⁸ Specifically, 94 percent of all USAF bases that are named in honor of individuals pay tribute to pilots.⁹ Likewise, at the USAF Academy, the main buildings of the Cadet Area (with the exception of the Cadet Chapel) are named after pilots: Harmon, Mitchell, Sijan, Vandenberg and Fairchild Halls, as well as the McDermott Library.¹⁰ Most telling is the fact that all CSAFs have been pilots, starting from General Henry “Hap” Arnold to the incumbent, General Norton A. Schwartz.¹¹ This legendary status of aviation *heritage* was emboldened by the celebrated pilot-centric USAF *image*.

This often self-promoted and carefully calculated USAF public *image* served it well in recruiting, funding and establishing its legitimacy as an independent service. For example, “By 1916 most nations were beginning to use their top-scoring pilots to enhance national prestige with full cooperation of their respective military establishments. In newspapers, through morale-boosting tours, on post cards and magazine covers, but above all through the moving picture, the

⁶ Coram, *Boyd: The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War*, 425.

⁷ Strickland, *Aerospace Power Journal*, 37.

⁸ McCuster, Joe McCuster’s List of Air Force Bases Website.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ National Park Service, *United States Air Force Academy, Cadet Area*.

¹¹ Air Force Historical Studies Office, *Air Force Chiefs of Staff*.

image of the air fighter was promoted.”¹² “The combined weight of documentary and feature films defined the way in which the public thought of air warfare during 1914-18, and created a stereotypical image of the airman [sic] for future generations.”¹³

The stature of pilots continued to gain altitude through both their illustrious deeds during WWII and advances in technology. “WWII created another generation of air heroes – the ‘Flying Tigers’ in China, the ‘Few’ of the Battle of Britain, and the aircrews of the strategic bomber offensive and Doolittle’s Tokyo Raiders.”¹⁴ The heroic efforts of Eighth Air Force, which sustained high altitude daylight bombing in the face of the unforgiving Nazi air defenses, became renowned across America. This legend was paid for in blood, as the number of air officers killed in action was double to that of ground forces.¹⁵ “By the (war’s end), the airman [sic] had become the final American hero, an image that achieved world recognition...”¹⁶ This pilot-centric *image* and rich aviation *heritage* fit hand-in-glove to form the core USAF *identity* since before its existence.

The genesis of USAF *identity* occurred during the struggle of its independence that fashioned a similitude of air-centric purpose and continuity over time. As the USAF matured, its identity predominantly remained a high-tech, air-centric force, although competing “secondary” missions influenced the USAF’s intra-service personality as the years progressed. In the end, the air-centric *heritage*, *image* and *identity* of the USAF provided the foundation for pilot-dominated CSAF leadership that is the trademark of the first two USAF Leadership

¹² Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun*, 26.

¹³ Ibid., 53.

¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹⁵ Colonel Michael Worden, *The Rise of the Fighter Generals*, 8.

¹⁶ Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun*, 6.

Watersheds, and will continue to influence senior leadership preponderance well into the 21st century.

The First Watershed – The Bomber Elitists

The USAF was dominated by bomber partisan leadership from its conception in 1947 until the last bomber CSAF retired in 1982. This watershed was heavily influenced by the struggle of obtaining an independent USAF and most significantly from the bomber generals' experiences and lessons learned in WWII. Colonel Mike Worden does a masterful job at analyzing this first watershed period in *The Rise of the Fighter Generals*, which could arguably be entitled, *The Fall of the Bomber Generals*. He states, "...World War II had a profound effect on the operationally oriented World War II generation. The high price of admission granted them elitism; the high cost of attrition created an unbreakable cohesion."¹⁷ This *heritage* and *image* gave rise to the *identity* of the bomber elitists, which was the single-minded focus on advancing the technology, organizations, resources and theory supporting the mantra of the invincibility of strategic bombing. During this era, all other USAF subcultures and missions took a backseat until three main factors began eroding the invulnerable bomber CSAF leadership.

As detailed by Colonel Worden, the primary factors that undermined the bomber generals' power base were the 1961-1968 reign of Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara; the technology-enabled rise of "unmanned" intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and the "limited" Vietnam War. Forebodingly, Secretary McNamara and the Kennedy Administration came into office with a glaringly different emphasis than that of General Curtis LeMay and his tribe of strategic bombing absolutists. McNamara stressed the need for a flexible response,

¹⁷ Worden, *The Rise of the Fighter Generals*, 16

which ran contrary to SAC and its coveted Single Integrated Operational Plan that supported a philosophy of massive retaliation. “Kennedy and McNamara wanted choices in an emergency other than ‘inglorious retreat or unlimited retaliation’...”¹⁸ Additionally, the relationship between Secretary McNamara and General LeMay deteriorated so badly that it was proposed that the only reason General LeMay was not relieved of his CSAF duties was because of President Johnson’s concerns that General LeMay would speak out on behalf of Johnson’s opponent in the impending presidential election.¹⁹

Limited warfare and limited financial resources also exacerbated the schism between the bomber absolutists and McNamara’s vision of flexible response. “The insularity and narrow doctrinal focus of SAC on its all-important mission, coupled with the rigid discipline and centralized control demanded by that mission, hampered the dominant bomber generals’ ability to contend with the realities of limited war in Vietnam.”²⁰ The following passage summarizes a McNamara-initiated major review of the military challenges confronting the US in 1961, from which came a decision to increase the nation’s capacity to conduct limited, non-nuclear warfare.

Contrastingly, the previously subordinated fighter community was better suited to conduct the tactical operations associated with a limited war in Vietnam where the bomber was initially ill-suited for conventional warfare and its leadership reluctant to expose its precious strategic assets to tactical engagement. Furthermore, General LeMay’s reluctance to put more resources into increasing the numbers and capabilities of America’s ICBM forces continued this downward spiral.”²¹

“By the 1960s, the bomber as a major [nuclear] deterrent was virtually redundant, and had been replaced by the more economically viable [unmanned] missile.”²²

¹⁸ Worden, *The Rise of the Fighter Generals*, 110.

¹⁹ Ibid., 147.

²⁰ Ibid., 236

²¹ Ibid., 237.

²² Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun*, 6

The 1970s signaled the beginning of the end for the bomber generals' reign on CSAF leadership. "By the 1970s Tactical Air Command (TAC) was procuring new fighters and Military Airlift Command (MAC) new transports, but SAC was still having difficulty buying the B-1. The Air Force simply could not control B-1 costs to the satisfaction of many in Congress, despite an aggressive lobbying campaign on Capitol Hill."²³ Moreover, the number of bombers available to fly began to shrink as technology boosted the importance and numbers of America's ICBM forces and the Vietnam War similarly bolstered the significance of TAC. Moreover, the dwindling bomber pilot population became even less competitive against other USAF officers during promotion boards and less competent for senior leader positions in an ever-diversifying USAF.²⁴ In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the bomber elitists found themselves of irreversibly declining stature, and the fighter generals were more than ready to assume the top ranks of USAF leadership.

The Second Watershed – The Fighter Mafia

The 2nd Watershed of USAF leadership began when General Charles A. Gabriel became the first fighter pilot CSAF in 1982 and endured until General T. Michael Moseley was unceremoniously replaced in 2008.²⁵ Like the bomber elitists, the fighter mafia image was that of a tight knit group that earned the right to govern by the price they paid during the Korean and Vietnam "limited" wars. This heritage, along with the success of the fighter pilot-led Gulf War and War in Kosovo served to confirm their right to lead and emboldened the fighter mafia to advance its fighter-centric vision into the 21st century USAF.

²³ Worden. *The Rise of the Fighter Generals*, 217

²⁴ Ibid., 145.

²⁵ Schactman, *Wired.com*.

Despite its successes during the 2nd Watershed, the fighter mafia's consecutive string of CSAF leaders abruptly ended in June 2008. Analogous to the bomber elitist downfall, the three primary forces that loosened the fighter mafia's hold on the CSAF reins were Secretary of Defense Dr. Robert M. Gates, the technology-enabled rise of "unmanned" Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPAs) and the "irregular" Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Generally speaking, Secretary Gates' direction to the USAF emphasized supporting the US ground forces fighting "today's war" while fighter mafia identity was anchored on preparation to fight the "future war" against a near-peer foe, with emphasis on pricey high-tech 5th generation fighters. After General Moseley was relieved, *Aviation Week* reported that Secretary Gates was less than happy with the previous actions of the former top USAF leadership.

Background conversations with retired USAF officials indicate they've known that Moseley and Wynne were in deepening trouble that began with them "pushing back" on Gates vision... [Gates'] said the services were not moving aggressively in wartime to provide resources needed now on the battlefield. "Because people were stuck in old ways of doing business, it's been like pulling teeth." He sharpened his criticism of the Air Force and Navy in identifying a "tendency toward what might be called 'Next-War-itis'" - the propensity of much of the defense establishment to be in favor of what might be needed in a future conflict.²⁶

Secretary Gates' firing of General Moseley seemed to have the intended result, as Congress ended F-22 funding and the USAF ramped up production of RPA and associated Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) infrastructure.²⁷

Colonel Pete Gersten, the 432nd Wing Commander at Creech AFB, Nevada, commands the majority of USAF's RPA Predator and Reaper aircraft. He summarized RPA growth by saying that when he took command in July 2009 there were 35 RPA Combat Air Patrols (CAPs) across the globe. "Today, there are 47 CAPs supporting Combatant Commanders 24/7/365 with

²⁶ Butler and Fulghum, *Aviation Week*, 27.

²⁷ Lubold. *The Christian Science Monitor*, 22.

a mandate to increase this number to 65 CAPs by the end of 2012.”²⁸ He added that he expects RPA production to continue its upward climb into 2013 and beyond.²⁹ This trend of rocketing RPA production compared to difficulties in sustaining F-22 and F-35 replacement numbers is reminiscent of the bomber generals’ difficulty of procuring the next generation bomber in the 1970s, as they simply could not control costs to the satisfaction of many in Congress.³⁰

In light of today’s irregular warfare conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, one could posit that Colonel Worden’s downfall of the bomber elitists becomes startlingly similar to the fighter mafia’s conundrum of today.

Contrastingly, the previously subordinated ~~fighter~~ RPA community is better suited to conduct the tactical operations associated with an *ISR-centric* limited war in ~~Vietnam~~ *Iraq and Afghanistan* where the ~~bomber~~ fighter is ~~initially~~ generally ill-suited for conventional *long-duration, repetitive ISR* warfare and its leadership reluctant to expose its precious ~~strategic~~ *5th generation* assets to tactical engagement. Furthermore, General ~~LeMay’s~~ *Moseley’s* reluctance to put more resources into increasing the numbers and capabilities of America’s ~~ICBM~~ RPA forces continued this downward spiral.³¹

The decline of the bomber absolutists took almost 20 years to become apparent through a permanent loss of the bomber CSAF once McNamara came on to the scene. The abrupt firing of General Moseley may not manifest itself in the permanent loss of the fighter CSAF, due to the large pool of fighter pilots throughout the general officer ranks; however it definitely foreshadows a changing of the guard that ushers in the 3rd Watershed of USAF leadership.³²

The Third Watershed – “Today’s War” Pilots

The 3rd Watershed of USAF leadership began when the first non-fighter pilot, General Norman G. Schwarz, became the CSAF in June 2008, and will continue until a non-rated

²⁸ Colonel Peter Gersten (432nd Wing Commander), interview by author, 06 January 2011.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Worden, *The Rise of the Fighter Generals*, 217.

³¹ Ibid., 237.

³² US Air Force Biographies Webpage.

general officer or a general officer who has his beginnings as an RPA pilot ascends to the CSAF throne. This era is marked by the realization that fighter pilots are no longer the given heir apparent to the CSAF position, and will be forced to compete with other kinds of pilots that possess the appropriate expertise to excel in “today’s war” and joint environment. “By nominating the first non-fighter pilot to lead the USAF since 1982, Defense Secretary Gates said his decision marks a ‘transitioning Air Force’ and that he understood the implications of not picking a fighter pilot.”³³ Despite this change, *pilots* will remain the presumptive CSAF candidates; the *heritage*, pilot-centric *image* and *identity* of the US Air Force holds sufficient importance and inertia that non-rated general officers will find it almost impossible to break this glass ceiling for the foreseeable future.

Competing missions, coupled with receding resources, will play a decisive role in the diminution of the fighter pilot stranglehold on the CSAF seat, and also gradually erode the overall dominance of traditional pilot USAF senior leadership. Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the USAF drastically increased its emphasis on traditional *other-than-fighter air-centric* mission, which diluted the relative end-all-be-all of fighter aircraft in the minds of “today’s war” decision-makers. More pointedly, the reemergence of the nuclear enterprise and the rise in importance of non-traditional, *non-air-centric* missions such as Space, Cyberspace, Special Operations and Joint Expeditionary Tasking (JET) Airmen filling customary Army roles are now essential missions that compete for resources and create a high-tech warrior ethos in which pilots are no longer the only Airmen facing enemy fire. Finally, a barely perceptible decrease in fighter pilot general officer billets and the notion that “fighter pilots know best” will come under increased scrutiny during this 3rd Watershed. USAF’s proposed force structure shift mirrors the

³³ Hoffman, *Air Force Times*, 16.

increased emphasis on RPAs and irregular warfare enabling career fields, and the decline in fighter aircraft.

The decrease in the number of fighter aircraft translates in a decrease in command opportunities for fighter pilots. This trend is reflected in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review Report in which the Department of Defense has mandated that the USAF reduce its number of fighter wings to as few as 16 out of a total of 76 wing-equivalents.³⁴ The reduction in fighter wings will slowly diminish the pool of fighter officers available for promotion to the USAF's senior leadership ranks since the Wing Commander position is the traditional litmus test and stepping stone to general officer rank. This decline is the result of a combination of an elimination of "legacy" 4th generation aircraft, diminishing replacement numbers of 5th generation fighters, budgetary constraints and the advent of RPAs.

USAF leadership claims that this reduction in legacy fighter aircraft is necessary for the procurement of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter in quantities necessary to replace A-10 and F-16 aircraft.³⁵ Unfortunately, the original cost of an F-35 has doubled to \$92 million per copy forcing Great Britain to reduce its buy from 138 F-35 aircraft to as few as 40.³⁶ These developments suggest that USAF F-35 numbers are in jeopardy of following the F-22, which in the 1980s was initially planned for a buy of 750, but only reached 187.³⁷ "US defense analyst Barry Watts of the Washington-based Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments said he expects the USAF to buy 800-1,000 F-35s instead of the 1,763 in current service plans, which in itself is a decrease from the original number of 2,978 at the start of the program."³⁸ As the

³⁴ Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, 10.

³⁵ Rabechault, *YaHoo! News*, 2.

³⁶ Cox, *Star-Telegram News*, 1.

³⁷ Auslin, *The Journal of the American Enterprise Institute*, 1

³⁸ Williams, *Air Force Times*.

number of manned cockpits steadily decline (13% reduction of manned, fixed wing aircraft from 2003-2009), the number of RPAs continues to swell (137% increase from 2003-2009).³⁹

The rapid expansion of RPAs is fueled by enabling technology, the unquenchable demand of persistent ISR coverage in today's war and the high-tech mindset of the 21st century USAF. Furthermore, the rise of RPA coincides perfectly with the up-in-coming "Generation Z" (also known as the "Net or Digital Generation"), which is the most connected and high-tech generation ever seen.⁴⁰ Colonel Gersten stated that by 2015, the USAF plans to possess 1,300 RPA pilots, which would make up almost 20% of USAF rated officers.⁴¹ As advances in technology enable RPAs to conduct increasingly complex missions and expand into air mobility, air refueling and bomber missions, the numbers of manned-aircraft pilots will continue to decrease. In *The Transformation of Air Power*, Benjamin Lambeth remarks, "In tomorrow's air and space community, combat aviators will increasingly find themselves sharing the operator spotlight with UAV (RPA) pilots, space controllers and information warriors, all of whom will be bona fide trigger pullers with a common operational-level responsibility and outlook."⁴²

The challenge for USAF leaders is to ensure that these RPA pilots are held in the same high esteem as today's traditional pilots, and to groom them for USAF senior leadership opportunities as "manned aircraft" pilots are today. Although the current force realignment features the rise of RPA without this traditional "manned pilot" commonality, the culture being instituted in RPA squadrons is aimed at replicating this same "pilot mentality" and warrior ethos,

³⁹ Air Force Association, *Air Force Magazine*, 51.

⁴⁰ Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World*, 2.

⁴¹ Gersten, interview by author, 06 January 2011.

⁴² Lambeth. *The Transformation of Air Power*, 253.

which bodes well for future RPA warrior leaders.⁴³ The USAF has already set the ground work to position “Generation Z” RPA pilots for future senior leadership opportunities.

In the summer of 2010, the USAF established a new “18U” RPA Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC) that guarantees RPA pilots an appropriate percentage of Professional Military Education (PME) spots, (joint) staff positions, Alpha tours (such as Air Liaison Officer (ALO) assignments) and creates command opportunities in the RPA career field.⁴⁴ Colonel Gersten is also focusing on the image and identity of RPA pilots by taking great pains in instilling USAF pilot *heritage* and warrior *image* and *identity* into this RPA generation. Initial indications are that he is succeeding, as significant numbers of the “Net Generation” are foregoing traditional undergraduate pilot training and volunteering to attend the USAF’s RPA beta test program in order to join the swelling ranks of RPA pilots.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Colonel Gersten is confident that in five years the RPA career field will be a “self sustaining” community that will no longer rely on the CAF and MAF pilots to fulfill RPA pilot requirements.⁴⁶ At some point in time, the heritage and pilot-centric image and identity inertia keeping pilots on the CSAF throne may well be overcome by the lack of “traditional” pilots in manned aircraft and the overwhelming numbers and professional expertise of RPA pilots and non-pilot Airmen (such as emerging Cyberspace warrior experts) that will usher in the 4th watershed of USAF leadership.

The Fourth Watershed – The Rise of RPA Pilots and Non-Pilots

The 4th Watershed begins when a career RPA pilot or non-pilot general officer ascends to the CSAF throne for the first time in USAF history. This will most likely happen in the 2040s when the initial 2010 BETA class of RPA careerists in the 18U AFSC begin filling senior leader

⁴³ Gersten, interview by author, 06 January 2011.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Tirpak, *Air Force Magazine*, 63.

⁴⁶ Gersten, interview by author, 06 January 2011.

positions and when RPAs begin replacing the majority of USAF manned aircraft. Additionally, the identity of senior leaders of this era will be highlighted by a diversification of all careers spanning the broad myriad of future USAF mission sets. By this time, the *manned* flying USAF heritage and bravado fighter pilot image of old will be entering its second century and the pilot-centricity of this future USAF will rest in the hands of RPA pilots. Furthermore, the militarization of space may generate the need for a non-pilot, space-centric CSAF; or, future technological advances in cyberspace “weaponry” in addition to its “commonality” of all USAF systems may give rise to a non-rated “Cyber CSAF” that skews the future USAF *identity* through a fundamentally different *image*. In any case, the senior leadership of the 4th Watershed *Air, Space and Cyberspace Force* must be prepared to defend US interests and defeat tomorrow’s enemies across the entire spectrum of conflict.⁴⁷ Given an unpredictable future, now is the time for current USAF leaders of all career fields to begin grooming 4th Watershed senior leaders so that they may effectively lead tomorrow’s USAF in the 21st century VUCA environment.

Conclusion

The first 60 years of USAF leadership were defined by the bomber elitists and fighter mafia of the first two Watersheds. This evolution of USAF senior leadership was built upon the manned, *flying-centric heritage, image and identity* of these first 60 years. The 3rd Watershed of USAF leadership began as the first non-fighter pilot was appointed CSAF in 2008, putatively ending the 26-year reign of fighter pilots. This 3rd Watershed is hypothesized to be represented by “today’s war” pilots occupying the CSAF seat, where fighter pilots will still compete for, but are no longer the automatic heir apparent. As non-traditional flying and non-flying missions increasingly compete with traditional flying missions in importance and preeminence, the image

⁴⁷ Gettle, *Air Force Print News*, 1.

and identity of this future USAF will develop to reflect USAF's changing nature and promote its unique capabilities, as the long blue line of USAF heritage continues. Whatever the outcome, all career fields must begin to identify and groom the 4th Watershed leaders today.

It is vitally important to recognize and acknowledge that the makeup of the USAF senior leadership is evolving in a way that provides an ever-increasing opportunity for non-fighter pilot rated officers to ultimately ascend to the position of CSAF. Therefore it is imperative that all career fields improve their processes of preparing future leaders to develop a stable of highly qualified candidates across the spectrum of USAF missions. Past studies offered concrete recommendations in effectively developing and selecting senior USAF leaders.

In her study, *The Rise of Air Mobility and Its Generals*, Lieutenant Colonel Laura Lenderman emphasized that cultivating robust senior leaders is essential to effective future leadership.

As the USAF's core mission shifts, both a strong contingent of senior leaders with air-mobility expertise and a global worldview should remain in place. AMC's focus on adapting its organization and developing a robust cadre of leaders who have the right mix of competencies and experiences indicates that mobility leaders are prepared to continue rising to meet the challenges within the USAF, throughout the nation and across the world.⁴⁸

Additionally, Colonel Worden, in *The Rise of the Fighter Generals* cautioned against monopolistic leadership and recommended methods to develop leaders.

"This historical study ends in 1982 and highlights the enduring dangers of parochialism and bias in any organization that is too homogenous in its senior leadership and culture. Homogeneity, as defined by shared experience, limits a total view of the institution's legitimate role. This organizational condition leans towards myopia and monistic thinking, often manifested in a consuming focus on a purpose or mission that favors the dominant culture." Additionally, this study

⁴⁸ Lenderman. *The Rise of the Air Mobility Generals*, 76.

suggests that broad education and experience and diversity of views at the senior executive level are necessary to cultivate visionary leaders.⁴⁹

Likewise, Major Bruce Danskine summarized his thoughts on USAF leadership in *The Fall of the Fighter Generals*.

History indicates that the USAF, as an institution, tends to become dominated by a single tribe (type of rated officer) at any one time rather than maintaining the competitive balance found in its sister services. This may not be the healthy approach. For an organization to be prepared to adapt to a changing environment, it would be preferable to have tribal balance, not dominance, be the norm.⁵⁰

Identifying the common themes of these past studies and blending them into lessons learned from this paper synthesizes a process for choosing future CSAFs in the 3rd Watershed and developing leaders of the 4th Watershed.

Foremost, the USAF must nurture future leaders that have a depth and breadth of service knowledge and are able to intricately comprehend and dexterously communicate the employment and sustainment of *air* power in a joint and politically-charged atmosphere - no matter what their AFSC mission set. Furthermore, a future CSAF must be joint-articulate and joint-experienced with approachable personality and an innate ability to work well with others in inter-service and multi-agency surroundings. Additionally, it is critical that senior leaders possess a superior intellect, agile thought process and vision to look beyond their time and no less importantly, be prepared to make sacrifices for the greater good.⁵¹ General Gregory S. Martin, former Commander, Air Force Material Command echoed these sentiments by saying that a CSAF must comply with the vision of civilian leadership by reprioritizing service requirements to meet the boss' priorities first, but without totally abandoning key service priorities for the future war.⁵²

⁴⁹ Worden. *The Rise of the Fighter Generals*. 238.

⁵⁰ Danskine. *Fall of the Fighter Generals*, 122.

⁵¹ Gersten, interview by author, 06 January 2011.

⁵² Martin, USAF (Ret), Question and Answer Session at Air War College, 08 December 2010.

General Schwartz is the embodiment of these 3rd watershed CSAF traits as reflected in the 2008 assessment of Loren Thompson, an analyst at the Lexington Institute.

(General) Schwartz was chosen because of (his) background in air mobility, special operations and joint commands. I cannot imagine a person better suited to this job at this point in history. He is so highly regarded among senior political appointees and he also has a low-key, get-along personality that will appeal to Secretary Gates. He is self-effacing and reserved and unfailingly courteous...I think the way most people will describe General Schwartz is as a team player with a giant-sized intellect.⁵³

The USAF must refine its processes on identifying future leaders with emphasis on developing the above characteristics and skill sets to create additional 3rd Watershed senior leaders of this caliber.

Overall, the USAF has a solid senior leader development system in place; therefore it is imperative that the selection process of 3rd Watershed CSAFs must break the perceived “cronyism” that defined the first two Watersheds. The USAF intra-service parochialism among competing career fields needs to be replaced with an attitude of mutual cooperation focused on selecting the best senior leader for the job vice the finest fighter pilot or special operations pilot for the job. The bomber elitist monopoly prevented a timely transition to and modernization of TAC and space forces to address the changing strategic landscape. Similarly, it can be argued since 2003 the fighter mafia injured the USAF’s credibility in the joint and political arenas and its ability to excel in “today’s war” by placing an inordinate amount of emphasis on the “future war’s” fighter requirements and its apparent unwillingness to “play well with others”. Present and future CSAFs must nominate their successors based on qualifications best-suited for today’s environment, yet possessing a balanced vision for future requirements. By considering senior leaders across the spectrum of career fields to identify who is best “CSAF qualified”, the USAF can avoid succumbing to the bomber elitist/fighter mafia paradigm of the past and tomorrow’s

⁵³ Hoffman, *Air Force Times*, 2.

USAF leadership will remain relevant in the joint VUCA environment of the 21st century and beyond.



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