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**A Sense of Purpose: The Bedrock of the U.S. Nuclear Deterrent**

"The paradox of war is, the adversary will always move against your perceived weakness. So a safe, secure and effective nuclear deterrent is there to ensure a war that can never be won, is never fought." Former Secretary of Defense James Mattis went on to say, "I am absolutely convinced that having this safe, secure, and effective deterrent is critical—the most critical piece of our nation's defense."<sup>1</sup> "At the end of the day, deterrence comes down to the men and women in uniform."<sup>2</sup> The question this paper addresses is: how do we motivate Airmen to give their best to perform this unsung duty, day after day, for years at a time?

A recent study found clarity of purpose to be the basis of verifiable mission success, purposeful leadership, and esprit de corps, which suggests that clearly communicating the higher purpose of their work to Airmen would help them find meaning in their tasks.<sup>3</sup> A sense that their work is meaningful, the result of internalizing a higher purpose, underpins the safety and security cultures critical to a successful nuclear enterprise.

This paper will build on their findings by focusing on five leadership principles, which, if collectively and effectively implemented, would provide the bedrock for safe, secure, and effective nuclear operations. The following principles have broad application to organizational leadership studies as a whole, but are specifically relevant to the military:

1. Develop and consistently communicate purpose, vision, and mission statements.
2. Establish and observe priorities, goals, objectives, and tasks.
3. Balance positional and personal power in order to achieve active followership.
4. Acknowledge the role followers and contexts play in nuclear operations.
5. Divest control in order to foster genuine empowerment.

This paper will examine each of these principles by introducing the leadership concept, identifying the particular importance it plays in providing a credible nuclear deterrent, and offering an effective method for implementation.

**Purpose, Vision, and Mission Statements**

*"Good squadron leaders lead their teams to achieve the team's purpose, but those leaders also understand their purpose as leaders more broadly. That purpose includes strengthening the individuals and the teams they lead."*<sup>4</sup>

Well-developed and unceasingly communicated purpose, vision, and mission statements are the first step in developing the stable safety and security cultures necessary

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<sup>1</sup> "Air Force Association 2017 Air, Space and Cyber Conference."

<sup>2</sup> "2018 Nuclear Posture Review," III.

<sup>3</sup> Davis and Casey, "A Model of Air Force Squadron Vitality," 6.

<sup>4</sup> Davis and Casey, 9.

to provide credible nuclear deterrence. Author and public speaker Simon Sinek likens finding “why” – a purpose or reason for existing – to developing the foundation for a vision, or long-term conceptualization of success, and a mission statement, which will help advance that vision.<sup>5</sup> The vision is the leader’s long-term, boundless, conceptualization of success for an organization. For example, “the World’s Greatest Air Force—Powered by Airmen, Fueled by Innovation.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, the Air Force leaders’ vision of success looks like Airmen exploiting innovations in order to remain an Air Force of unmatched capability. In the military, mission statements should be closely aligned with what the Air Force calls a Designed Operational Capability, or DOC statement. The mission statement clearly and concisely expresses an organization's role in the nuclear enterprise and how it serves to advance the commander's vision, but also that of the Air Force.

Despite the abundance of vision statements and clearly defined mission sets, the word ‘purpose’ is not common in the Air Force lexicon. A close examination of available literature reveals many fundamental purposes for the Air Force's nuclear enterprise; in fact, nuclear practitioners play a vital role in the U.S.'s national security strategy through:

- “Deterrence of nuclear and non-nuclear attack;
- Assurance of allies and partners;
- Achievement of U.S. objectives if deterrence fails; and
- Capacity to hedge against an uncertain future.”<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, these forces play an essential role in safeguarding nuclear weapons from a multitude of threats, including covert drone tactics and destructive cyber collection efforts, both of which pose a direct and significant threat to nuclear security efforts.

In order to develop a relevant purpose statement and simultaneously foster institutional buy-in, experts recommend forming diverse focus groups to identify the organization's meaningful contributions and impacts, which will enable the drafting of actionable purpose statements that look something like: “To (Contribution) so that (Impact).”<sup>8</sup> The Air Force Pararescueman’s Creed is the perfect example: “It is my duty as a Pararescueman to save life and to aid the injured. I will be prepared at all times to perform my assigned duties quickly and efficiently, placing these duties before personal desires and comforts. These Things We Do, That Others May Live.”<sup>9</sup> Reduced to a simple to memorize and easy to recite “to-so that” purpose statement, it reads: To save life and to aid the injured so that others may live. Translate that, for example, to nuclear security, and you might see: To secure nuclear weapons so that America remains a safe and stable nation.

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<sup>5</sup> *How Does the WHY Relate to Vision?*

<sup>6</sup> “U.S. Air Force - Vision.”

<sup>7</sup> “2018 Nuclear Posture Review,” 20.

<sup>8</sup> Sinek, Mead, and Docker, *Find Your Why*, 50.

<sup>9</sup> “USAF Pararescue – PJ Rodeo.”

### **Setting Priorities, Goals, Objectives, and Tasks**

*“Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.”<sup>10</sup>*

The purpose, vision, and mission statements combine to support the development of an organizational guide for success, one that includes priorities, goals, objectives, and relevant tasks. Organizational leaders sometimes underestimate the significance a well-communicated guide can have on achieving an organization’s vision and mission. However, defining each element and understanding how they build one upon the other is of utmost importance. Reflecting on his time as the Commander, 55th Wing, the only wing in the Air Force explicitly tasked with providing aerial nuclear treaty verification and direct support to nuclear command and control operations, Brigadier General Select Michael Manion said “that setting the mission, vision, and priorities basically establishes the ‘road’ for commanders to drive their units to greater success. In hindsight - one of the best things I think we did was tie the Commander’s Update Brief to the four priorities, which fostered critical thought, crosstalk, and the implementation of shared ideas. I hoped that establishing the mission, vision, and priorities allowed my commanders to get after their objectives with top cover. Additionally, because ours were nested with higher headquarters, I always had relevant talking points with senior leaders.”<sup>11</sup>

In the stringent world of nuclear operations, investing sufficient time in completing the process becomes key to avoiding a compliance-driven command. Compliance driven commands often manifest as inefficient, risk-averse units that lack trust. They measure success by conforming to instructions, following checklists, passing inspections, and whether or not individuals “survive” long enough to receive their next assignment or promotion. In other words, “discernment is often far more accurate than either observation or measurement,” and creating a performance-driven command, one with methods for everyone to make judgment-based decisions in the best interest of the organization, is far more effective and efficient than relying solely on a robust bureaucracy with oversight mechanisms and decision making authority retained at the highest levels.<sup>12</sup>

Once asked by leadership to list goals and objectives for our respective organizations, my fellow commanders and I came to the table with different interpretations of the task, and therefore a range of answers. We discovered that building a guide is a complicated process that includes robust input from all levels of the organization. The range of definitions for each term and the lack of readily available Air Force literature on the subject frustrated us. We had not been taught how to create and communicate an effective model to our forces. I had captured most of the required information in an adopted model for my squadron; however, I developed much of it incorrectly and could have benefited from the following lesson.

Initially, a leader must develop priorities, an explicit list of what they consider most important to achieving their vision; well-articulated priorities are paramount and serve to guide the development of relevant goals. Goals are nebulous macro-level ideas

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<sup>10</sup> Knight, “27 Fantastic Quotes by ‘Old Blood and Guts’ General Patton.”

<sup>11</sup> Manion, Establishing Mission, Vision, and Priorities.

<sup>12</sup> Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, 235.

that describe a flexible path towards achieving a mission; they must be guided by the organization's vision and aligned with the leader's priorities. Goals will serve to guide the development of relevant SMART objectives, which are single, specific, time-bound statements with measurable and attainable results. Objectives must nest under the goals, aligned with the leader's priorities, and tied to the organization's vision. Frequently the terms goal and objective are inappropriately used interchangeably; Table 1 presents a visual depiction of the differences between the two. Finally, tasks are the to-do list, or actions to be completed in order to achieve an objective. While some tasks are driven by required guidance, others should be created and maintained by lower organizational echelons specifically aimed at accomplishing published objectives. Commanders can help sustain a singular focus on providing the nation a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent by abolishing unnecessary tasks that fail to advance an objective or cannot be linked to a priority.

**Table 1, Goals versus SMART Objectives**

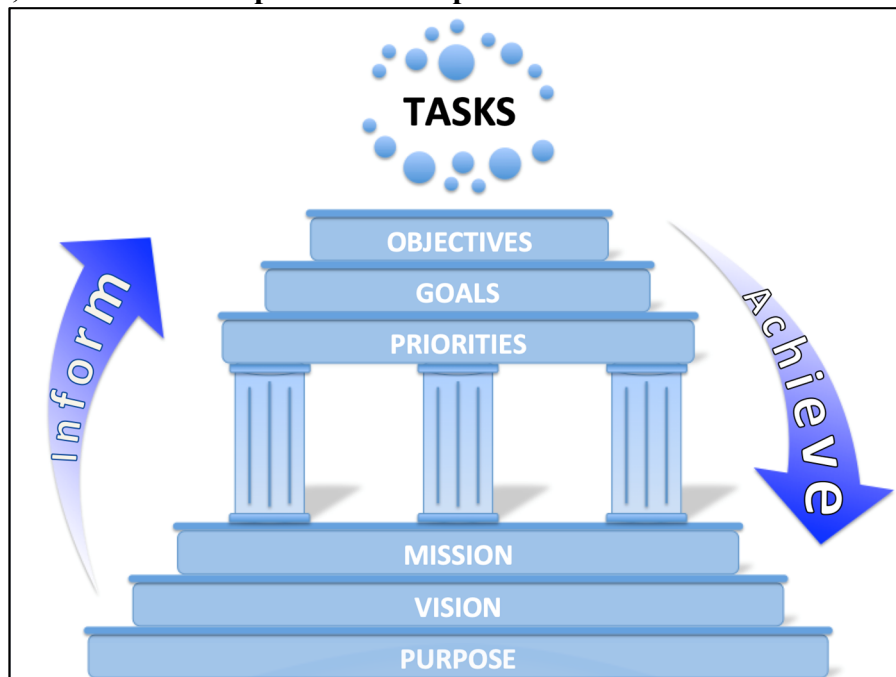
<b>Goals</b>	<b>SMART Objectives</b>
Macro ideas articulated as a broad plan	<b><u>S</u>pecific:</b> Micro facts communicated as a specific plan
May not be measurable or tangible	<b><u>M</u>easurable:</b> Must be measurable and tangible
Generic action	<b><u>A</u>ttainable/Achievable:</b> Explicit action; may require milestones
The general target of one's endeavors	<b><u>R</u>elevant/Results Focused:</b> Something one's efforts intend to accomplish
Long-term	<b><u>T</u>imely/Time-bound:</b> Short to medium-term

Figure 1 is a model for purpose-driven operations and constitutes a visual depiction of the entire process. It enables leaders to decentralize execution by providing the framework required for followers to accept responsibility, demonstrate initiative, and make decisions at the lowest possible level, all in a manner that best serves the interests of the organization. It ensures that everyone in the organization is "highly aligned and loosely coupled," moving towards a shared vision without the need for recurring leadership involvement in the decision making cycle.<sup>13</sup> In order for the process to succeed, it must be regularly visited by the leadership team and consistently communicated to the organization. While a leader's priorities are not likely to change in the short span of a military command tour, task completion may drive new goals and objectives for their unit. Leaders must remember their unit's purpose and stay focused on achieving their mission and vision, which cannot be accomplished making shortsighted compliance-based decisions. The purpose informs the entire process while tasks, objectives, goals, and priorities help to accomplish the organization's mission, achieve the vision, and fulfill its purpose. Figure 2 is a sample outline of a completed model.

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<sup>13</sup> "Netflix Culture."

**Figure 1, A Model for Purpose-Driven Operations**



**Figure 2, Outline for Purpose-Driven Operations**

<b>Purpose-Driven Operations</b>	
<b>1. Purpose:</b>	To secure nuclear weapons so that America remains a safe and stable nation.
<b>2. Vision:</b>	World-class Defenders providing full-spectrum Integrated Defense.
<b>3. Mission:</b>	Identify, deter, and defeat threats to our nuclear arsenal.
<b>4. Priorities:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Full Spectrum Threat Response</li><li>b. Robust Mutually Supporting Partnerships</li><li>c. Healthy and Resilient Defenders</li><li>d. Professional, Trained, Focused, AEF Ready Airmen</li><li>e. Flexible, Learning Organization</li></ul>
<b>5. Goals:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Identify, deter, and defeat threats to the installation, assets, and personnel</li><li>b. Foster robust external relationships and partnerships</li><li>c. Conduct strategic budgeting, execute a proactive spend plan, and maintain adequate facilities</li><li>d. Sustain readiness by promoting social, mental, physical, and spiritual fitness</li><li>e. Provide useful, interactive learning and conduct valuable professional development</li><li>f. Actively manage the force to maintain consistency and grow future leaders</li><li>g. Provide quality of life engagements for Airmen and their families</li></ul>
<b>6. Objectives and Tasks:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Create new gate turnaround procedures with effective tracking mechanisms<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>i. Implement effective containment process</li><li>ii. Fill out field interview cards for anyone without access</li><li>iii. Practice active barrier engagement</li></ul></li><li>b. Rewrite Information Fusion Cell Memorandum of Agreement<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>i. Agree upon time-sharing arrangement</li><li>ii. Identify specific participants and alternates</li><li>iii. Outline principal duties and responsibilities for members</li></ul></li><li>c. Realign post priority chart in order to transition to 8-hour shifts<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>i. Review instruction-based posting requirements</li><li>ii. Identify lower priority posts for commander's risk-based decision</li><li>iii. Update SSIs, call signs, and posting rosters</li></ul></li></ul>



### Positional and Personal Power

*“All commanding officers and others in authority in the Air Force are required—*  
*(1) to show in themselves a good example of virtue, honor, patriotism, and*  
*subordination;*  
*(2) to be vigilant in inspecting the conduct of all persons who are placed under their*  
*command;*  
*(3) to guard against and suppress all dissolute and immoral practices, and to*  
*correct, according to the laws and regulations of the Air Force, all persons who are*  
*guilty of them; and*  
*(4) to take all necessary and proper measures, under the laws, regulations, and*  
*customs of the Air Force, to promote and safeguard the morale, the physical well-*  
*being, and the general welfare of the officers and enlisted persons under their*  
*command or charge.”*<sup>14</sup>

I once had a commander who, while pounding his fist on his desk, yelled at his chief enlisted manager: “WHY DON'T THEY RESPECT ME?” Presumably, “they” meant his officers and senior noncommissioned officers, and the answer was he had not earned it; he micromanaged his subordinates and exercised fear and intimidation to accomplish his objectives. He threatened to fire us, his commanders, no less than three times each. Often for lack of experience and training, leaders like him attempt to maintain all aspects of control, but “traditional authoritarian supervision is a Win/Lose paradigm.”<sup>15</sup>

Defining the title leader can be difficult, but for this argument, a leader is merely someone who builds within his or her followers a sense of desire or obligation to follow. Leaders accomplish this by using numerous power sources, but this paper will focus on two overarching theories commonly found in the military command structure, positional and personal power. Military command is the very essence of positional power, or the vested authority to issue orders to accomplish a mission and reward or punish subordinates for their performance.<sup>16</sup> Simply put, military members are compelled by law to follow those exercising positional power.

The other main power base at play in the military command structure is personal power. It manifests in phrases like “lead from the front” and “lead by example.” Its proper development will enable leaders to rely far less on positional power. For this discussion, personal power includes charismatic leadership, expert power, and referent power. Charismatic commanders do not claim vested authority; they demonstrate leadership and possess a certain personal spark that inspires Airmen to follow their lead.<sup>17</sup> Charisma lends credibility to a commander’s vision and rallies followers to a purpose. Charismatic commanders often recognize that it is not about what is suitable for the commander, but what is right for the command.

Expert power is an extension of competence, or a measure of one’s perceived ability to accomplish, in the case of military command, a given mission because

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<sup>14</sup> “[USC02] 10 USC 9233: Requirement of Exemplary Conduct.”

<sup>15</sup> Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, 235.

<sup>16</sup> Raven, “A Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence,” 220.

<sup>17</sup> Adair-Totef, “Max Weber’s Charisma,” 192.

followers assume the leader knows best.<sup>18</sup> Obtaining a high level of competence requires effort; a commander's ability to exhibit competence is in the eye of the beholder, measured not only through self-reflection, but also simultaneously by superiors, peers, and subordinates alike.

Referent power is the result of some interpersonal connection that compels followers' admiration and respect.<sup>19</sup> They desire to achieve the organizational vision in order that the leader succeeds, and in turn, bestows their appreciation on their followers.

Successfully navigating each – charismatic leadership, expert power, and referent power – will earn commanders personal power, or power which their followers confer upon them. In other words, subordinates are motivated to follow because they want to, not because they have to. Frequently personal power is overlooked as a valid, valuable source of power in military command because its three subcomponents are challenging to master, and if we consider the Peter Principle of promoting someone until they reach a level of incompetence, they are not necessarily prerequisites for military command selection.

While the nuclear mission is highly prescriptive by nature, relying heavily on detailed instructions and checklist operations, there is room for personal power. Subordinates who confer personal power on their commanders are more inclined to internalize a higher purpose; they recognize that their mission impacts a credible nuclear deterrent and enables U.S. leaders “to speak from a position of strength on matters of war and peace.”<sup>20</sup> As a result, they are more inclined to participate in a learning organization – one that fosters a willingness to question, modify, or eliminate tasks that do not advance mission objectives – and are motivated to develop and implement improvements to their safety and security cultures.

There is no lack of awareness in the military as to the importance of the leader-follower relationship. Servant leader; mission first, people always; take care of your people, and they will take care of the mission all top the list of catchphrases used to capture the significance and interdependence of leaders and their would-be followers. However, commanders may still rely too heavily on positional power in order to compensate for an absence of personal power. In order to better prepare future leaders for command, lessons on the subcomponents of personal power should be taught in the military academies and officer training corps, and thereafter reinforced in professional military education courses. Future leaders who aspire to command should commit themselves to an early individual study of their craft and practice both leadership theories in order to develop a balance that works best for their style.

While personal power will provoke collaboration and prove to be the most effective method of instilling a sense of purpose in an organization, to thrive in command, one must successfully navigate both positional and personal power to lead effectively across a spectrum of followers.

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<sup>18</sup> Raven, “A Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence,” 221.

<sup>19</sup> Raven, 221.

<sup>20</sup> “2018 Nuclear Posture Review,” I.



### The Role of Followers and Context

*“For the true secret of the power of the American soldier is his individuality – the natural result of American citizenship.”<sup>21</sup> “[Confederate LTG Thomas J. “Stonewall”] Jackson might have helped his cause with men and officers if he had given them even the most rudimentary idea of what they were doing, or where they were going. He had told no one of anything of his plans, not even his second in command.”<sup>22</sup>*

Followers play just as active a role in mission success as the leaders working to build their allegiance. For this paper, a follower is one who chooses, through some level of commitment, to support a leader. Doctor Barbara Kellerman, one of only a handful of scholars who writes professionally on the importance of followers, makes the argument that followers generally engage in one of the following manners found in Table 2.

**Table 2, Range of Followership<sup>23</sup>**

<b>Followers’ Level of Engagement</b>	<b>Short Definition</b>
Isolates	Dispassionate, Uninterested, Individuals
Bystanders	Willful Nonparticipants
Participants	Positive or Negative Contributors
Activists	Enthusiastic Supporters or Oppositionists
Diehards	Ardent Crusaders

How motivated the follower is to engage will presumably determine where they fall on Kellerman’s spectrum. Often a lack of effective two-way communication between leaders and followers leaves one or the other unaware of or misinterpreting the full complement of circumstances for a given situation, in which case leaders may inappropriately apply power and followers might engage in a less than optimum manner. While in command I implemented an innovative solution to improve two-way communication. I borrowed the idea to post a whiteboard in a high-traffic location within the squadron, which allowed every Airman the opportunity to publicly identify problems and either implement, suggest, or request solutions. Leadership was required to ensure every comment was addressed with a solution or the complement of circumstances that shaped the perceived dilemma. Highly utilized and controversial at times, the board represented every level of follower engagement. Isolates paid it no attention. Bystanders often stopped to read the comments but never added anything. Participants contributed, oftentimes positively, sometimes negatively. Activists petitioned to have the board removed because it subverted the chain of command while others made it a point to solve problems at the lowest level. Diehards regularly touted the improved communication at every echelon within the squadron and credited the board with much of that success. As the saying goes, “no involvement, no commitment.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Jackson, *Memoirs of Stonewall Jackson*, 511.

<sup>22</sup> Gwynne, *Rebel Yell*, 184.

<sup>23</sup> Kellerman, *Followership: How Followers Are Creating Change and Changing Leaders*.

<sup>24</sup> Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, 151.

Followers must invest in the Model for Purpose-Driven Operation because commitment is a necessary prerequisite for robust safety and security cultures. They crave transparency, and a leader's most exceptional display of trust is to share with them a strategic vision, one that ties tasks and objectives to an overarching purpose, and then allows them the freedom to make decisions that best achieve that vision. Only then can a leader expect to tap into the real strength of America's servicemen and women, their individuality, personal motivators, and desire to be a part of something greater than themselves. Understanding these relationships is key to an organization's success.

The relationship between leaders and followers is nothing without what Kellerman calls contextual awareness. Here I define context as conditions that create or influence a particular situation. Context, as it applies to Airmen in the nuclear enterprise, is a topic that would likely benefit from further research. However, two of the surest contextual elements impacting modern nuclear forces are the absence of a near-peer competitor like that of the Cold War and the simple fact that location matters and the majority of Air Force nuclear forces serve in less than desirable locations.

Like the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, many would argue that nuclear weapons deter potential adversaries daily and that failure in any aspect of the mission could have strategic impacts. However, the likelihood of a nuclear exchange has never again risen to Cold War levels.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, absent from the contextual equation for subsequent generations of nuclear practitioners has been the near-peer adversary that made failure in the nuclear enterprise a clear and present danger. Without a *metus hostilis*, or fear of an enemy, the need for a robust nuclear enterprise at all levels of the DoD seemed less critical than Air Force combat operations. Subsequently, it did not attract the level of attention it deserved.

Following an August 29, 2007 incident in which the Air Force mistakenly flew a pylon of six nuclear warheads from Minot AFB, ND to Barksdale AFB, LA an independent advisory group called the Defense Science Board (DSB) told the Secretary of Defense (SecDef):

“The Department of Defense (DoD) has received authoritative and credible reports of declining focus and an eroding nuclear enterprise environment for at least a decade with little in the way of effective lasting response...There is little mystery regarding what needs to be done and how to do it. The nuclear enterprise performed at all levels with the needed competence for decades.”<sup>26</sup>

Conversely, in the DoD Phase I Report following the incident the Honorable James R. Schlesinger, Chairman, Secretary of Defense Task Force on DoD Nuclear

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<sup>25</sup> General David Goldfein, CSAF, in a January 18, 2017 speech at the American Enterprise Institute entitled *The Future of American Airpower*, said the: “...nuclear deterrent underwrites every military operation on the globe.” For more, see: [https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/csaf/GoldfeinOpeningRemarks\\_TheFutureofAmericanAirpower\\_AEI%2018Jan17.pdf](https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/csaf/GoldfeinOpeningRemarks_TheFutureofAmericanAirpower_AEI%2018Jan17.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Welch, “The Defense Science Board Permanent Task Force on Nuclear Weapons Surety Report on the Unauthorized Movement of Nuclear Weapons,” 1.

Weapons Management, told the SecDef:

“Though reduced in scope, the nuclear mission remains essential...the esprit de corps of those who serve in it must be revived...With the end of the Cold War, and the sharply reduced likelihood of a nuclear exchange, awareness of the role and power of nuclear weapons has diminished. But their power and uniqueness endure—and must again be clearly understood if they are to play their crucial role in nuclear deterrence.”<sup>27</sup>

The DSB completely ignored context in their comment. Moreover, it failed to acknowledge the impact 16 years' worth of lost expertise can have on a mission, which makes "There is little mystery regarding what needs to be done and how to do it," a remarkably ill-informed observation. Schlesinger is, therefore, more in touch with the impact of context, in this case, the lack of a near-peer adversary in the nuclear arena, and aptly acknowledges the decline in esprit de corps by a cadre of practitioners who have not actively employed their trade since the end of the Cold War.

Nearly 15 years later, one could argue that several Airmen struggle to find purpose in the nuclear arena. However, as the Nuclear Posture Review argued, “the deterrence effects they [nuclear weapons] provide are unique and essential to preventing adversary nuclear attacks, which is the highest priority of the United States. U.S. nuclear capabilities cannot prevent all conflict, and should not be expected to do so. But, they contribute uniquely to the deterrence of both nuclear and non-nuclear aggression.”<sup>28</sup>

A common enemy can have a unifying effect and drive an organization towards achieving its vision. It emphasizes the immediacy of the situation and awakens a sense of patriotism. While this paper does not advocate for a fabricated metus hostilis, one must at least consider whether, given current strategic relations with Russia and China, Airmen can be convinced that there is again a clear and present danger to the United States. Nuclear-capable enemies pose a threat to our national interests. Readiness translates to victory and camaraderie; resilience, and high morale become byproducts of a shared sense of purpose. Therefore, military leaders must fill the Cold War void by consistently communicating the purpose of the U.S. nuclear deterrent and the critical role nuclear operators play in ensuring a safe, secure, and effective force.

When weaving a central theme for purpose-driven operations, commanders should look to the National Defense Strategy, which identifies several threats to U.S. national interests, including:

- “China is a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimate its neighbors while militarizing features in the South China Sea” and seeks the “displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.”
- “Russia has violated the borders of nearby nations and pursues veto power over the economic, diplomatic, and security decisions of its neighbors,”

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<sup>27</sup> Schlesinger, “Report of the Secretary of Defense Task Force on DoD Nuclear Weapons Management Phase 1: The Air Force’s Nuclear Mission.”

<sup>28</sup> “2018 Nuclear Posture Review,” VI.

- they “want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model.”
- “North Korea and Iran are destabilizing regions through their pursuit of nuclear weapons or sponsorship of terrorism.”
  - Terrorists “continue to pursue WMD, while the spread of nuclear weapon technology...remains a persistent problem.”<sup>29</sup>

To a lesser contextual degree than a near-peer adversary, location matters for military service members, and the majority of the Air Force nuclear forces serve in relatively rural locations with extreme weather. Take Figure 4, for instance, which shows on a scale of -2 through 2, where zero is neutral, -2 is highly undesirable, and 2 is highly desirable, the location desirability ratings for Security Forces officers considered for reassignment on the winter 2019 cycle. Of note, the average desirability rating for the three lowest-rated continental U.S. (CONUS) nuclear installations was a -1.27. Comparatively, the three lowest-rated CONUS non-nuclear installations scored a -1.26. Interestingly, all six are rural locations, and all but Whiteman Air Force Base (AFB), MO, experience fairly extreme climate conditions.<sup>30</sup> The Summer 2020 results show no discernible difference between career fields that directly serve in the nuclear enterprise and those that do not. For example, nuclear Security Forces officers scored Minot a -.87 while non-nuclear Force Support officers scored it a -.88.<sup>31</sup> Figure 5 shows five of the six nuclear enterprise locations – Montana, New Mexico, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Wyoming – rate below the average desirability rating. North Dakota ranks last at just shy of double the undesirable average. These ratings may indicate a lack of desire to serve in these locations versus a lack of desire to serve in the nuclear enterprise.<sup>32</sup>

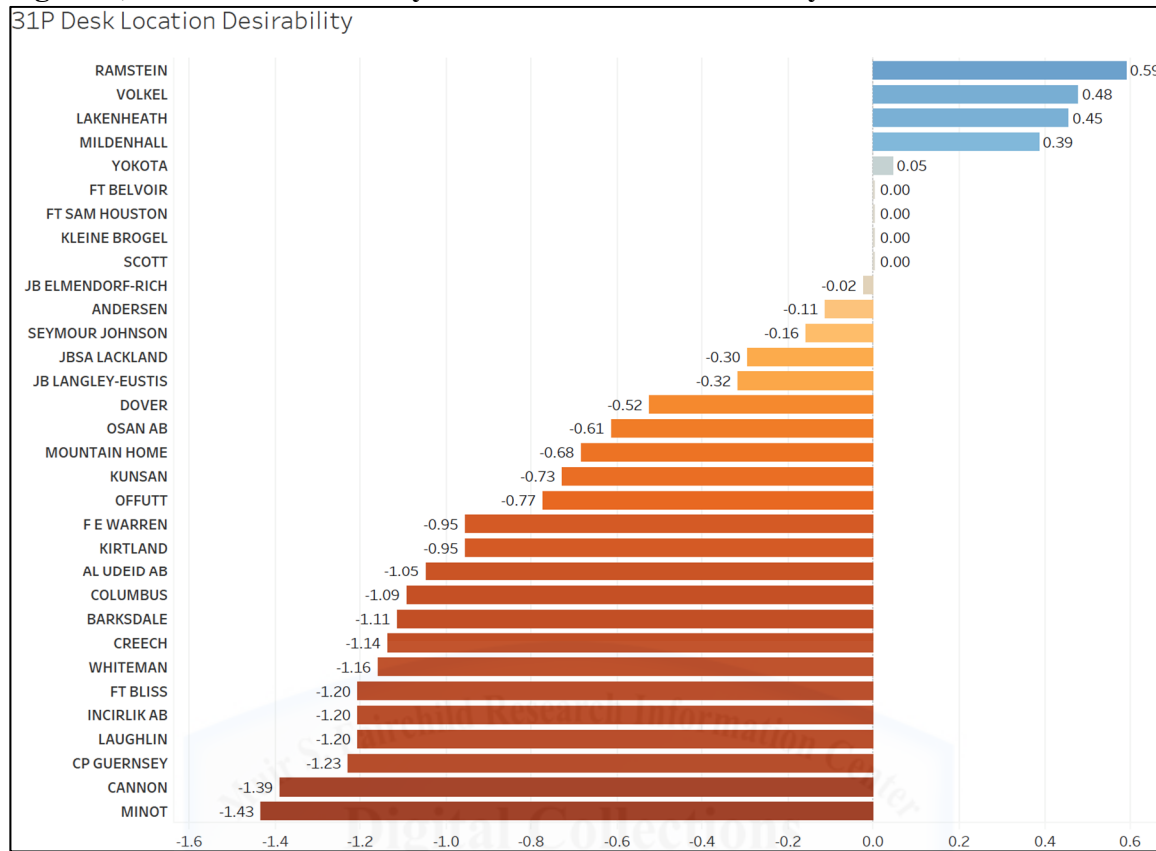
<sup>29</sup> Mattis, “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy,” 1–3.

<sup>30</sup> Minot AFB, ND: 47 inches average annual snowfall; coldest month averages 4 degrees. Camp Guernsey, WY: 37 inches average annual snowfall; coldest month averages 18 degrees. Fort Bliss, TX: 10 inches of average annual rainfall with temperatures that range from 33 to 96 degrees. Laughlin AFB, TX: 19 inches average annual rainfall with average temperatures in the 90s from May-September. Cannon AFB, NM: 18 inches average annual rainfall with average annual temperatures that range from 25 to 91 degrees. For more, see [www.usclimatedata.com](http://www.usclimatedata.com).

<sup>31</sup> Air Force Force Support Officers encompass Manpower, Personnel, and Services related programs.

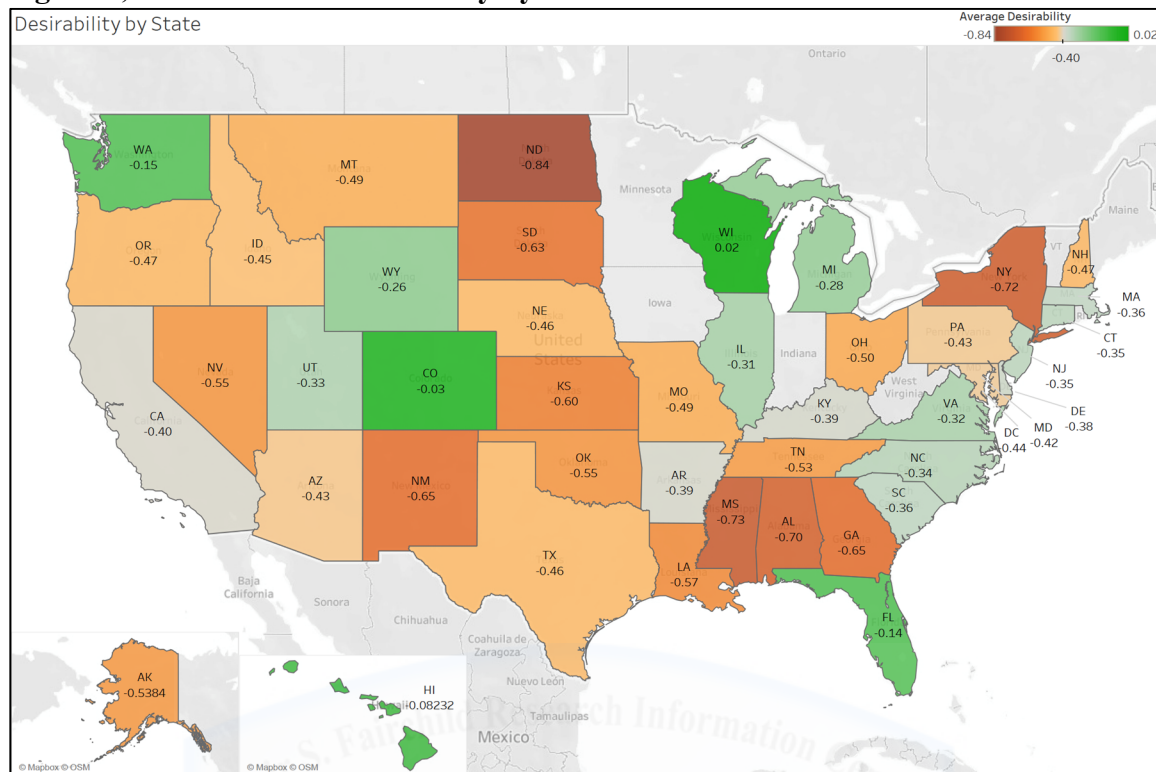
<sup>32</sup> Morale issues have plagued the Air Force nuclear enterprise over the years, often attributed to the perfectionist mentality that accompanied 24/7 nuclear alert. After the 2007 Minot to Barksdale incident, the DSB interviewed over 8,000 officers. Of those, only 37 percent expressed a desire to perform “nuclear-related work” for their entire career, compared to 62 percent in the Army and 83 percent in the Navy. For more, see <https://publicintegrity.org/national-security/air-force-seeks-less-perfection-in-its-nuclear-missile-corps/>, which references a 2013 confidential RAND study.

**Figure 4, Winter 2019 Security Forces Location Desirability Index<sup>33</sup>**



<sup>33</sup> “VML Winter 2019 Location Desirability Index.” I simply draw on this snapshot as an example; it cannot fully account for any specific variable, i.e., region, weather, mission, infrastructure, leadership, or local support.

**Figure 5, Summer 2020 Desirability by State<sup>34</sup>**



To their credit, the Air Force has since implemented several incentives for nuclear practitioners, including four-year controlled tours in order that security forces have a guaranteed option to rotate between nuclear and non-nuclear assignments and incentive pay for assignments within the nuclear enterprise. Senior leaders also recognized the unique contributions nuclear practitioners made to the Air Force mission and authorized the award of the Nuclear Deterrence Operations Service Medal. Nonetheless, these incentives fail to give credence to the bearing location may have on one's willingness to serve in the nuclear enterprise. As a result, methods to consistently improve camaraderie and morale must be a central theme to the practical commander's plan of action.

Bottom line, commanders who ignore the interdependent relationship between leaders, followers, and context can have ruinous effects on their career, their mission, and those entrusted to their command.

<sup>34</sup> "VML Summer 2020 Cycle State Map." I simply draw on this snapshot as an example; it cannot fully account for any specific variable, i.e., region, weather, mission, infrastructure, leadership, or local support.



## Divesting Control

*"Directed empowerment programs are flawed because they are predicated on this assumption: I have the authority and ability to empower you (and you don't).*

*Fundamentally, that's disempowering."*<sup>35</sup>

The natural result of a commander's ability to divest control is the genuine empowerment of their followers. Mission command "empowers individuals to exercise judgment in how they carry out their assigned tasks" and requires leaders to "delegate decisions to subordinates whenever possible, which minimizes detailed control and empowers subordinates' initiative to make decisions based on understanding what the commander wants rather than on constant communication."<sup>36</sup> Author, public speaker, and former naval commander, retired Captain L. David Marquet, says that commanders must actively divest control by allowing subordinates to create solutions, reduce top-down monitoring, and practice open communication. He calls the enabling principles competence and clarity.<sup>37</sup>

The divestiture of control enables commanders to tap into the individual experiences of a diverse organization and encourage innovative thought, all in order to achieve greater success, improve morale, and help build a sense of purpose amongst followers. Clarity means that the organization wholly understands the Model for Purpose-Driven Operations in Figure 1, and therefore effectively implements solutions that are in the best interest of the organization. Competence, on the other hand, derives from a learning organization, one that certifies task proficiency and subsequently reduces mistakes through what Marquet calls deliberate action, or pausing, verbalizing, and gesturing towards the next step.<sup>38</sup> Competence and clarity bestow upon followers the confidence required to question those orders and procedures that appear contrary to the vision.

In my experience, three of the most common and fundamentally disempowering responses to mistakes in the field of nuclear operations are to retrain the offender, fire the leader responsible, or write a new policy. Indeed, these are viable options; however, the long-term ramifications of what may be a rapid but shortsighted solution could be detrimental. That said, retraining someone assumes they should not have been assigned the task in the first place and may result in a passive 'just tell me what to do' follower. Additionally, firing someone encourages a culture of risk-averse oversight and micromanagement that cannot possibly eliminate every mistake. Finally, new policy guidance in response to an error is frequently published to ensure no one misinterprets the intent. The result of the latter inherently reclaims decision-making authority while dictating a seemingly infinite number of tasks. The cumulative effect may harm daily operations and disenfranchise the average practitioners who cannot possibly familiarize themselves – and thereby comply – with all the material. These reactions have driven increased reliance on higher headquarters input regarding unit-level decisions, which in

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<sup>35</sup> Marquet, *Turn the Ship Around!*, 59.

<sup>36</sup> "JP 1, Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States.Pdf," V-15.

<sup>37</sup> Marquet, *Turn the Ship Around!*, 206.

<sup>38</sup> Marquet, 120-21.

turn drives additional higher headquarters guidance. If someone is "making decisions that reduce the decision-making power of the future, you're probably doing it wrong."<sup>39</sup>

Some level of risk acceptance is inherent to the empowerment of subordinates, and that is precisely why some commanders find the practice easier said than done. While in command, I experienced this empowerment dilemma firsthand. Over a relatively short period, we experienced multiple personnel proceeding through a base access point without having completed the appropriate credential check. There were procedures in place to stop the vehicle; however, we were not following them. The installation commander called me to his office, and it was clear that the focus on the problem had reached the highest levels of the Air Force, and that if we had another incident, we would likely all be removed from command.

Herein lay the dilemma; my command was on the line, and by default, my next promotion. As a leadership team, we had practiced for months pushing decision-making authority to the lowest levels, encouraging subordinates to find and implement improvements and push back on those tasks and policies that did not advance our unit objectives. I was confident we were making headway; I also knew that trying to solve the problem and implement a new process myself would have detrimental effects on our progress and likely result in a less than optimal solution.

As expected, the team took the problem to our lowest ranking members, the Airmen and Seamen that worked the entry control points every day. They defined multiple concerns, tested a potential solution, and modified the process, all before coming to me for approval to implement. Not surprisingly, I finished out nearly a year in command without a single unauthorized entry. I attribute their success to true empowerment. These Airmen and Seamen were clear in their mission and competent in their duties; they had the support of their leadership team, and were intimately involved in finding and implementing a solution from the start. They had arrived at a sense of purpose, that they mattered, and that their role in enabling strategic nuclear deterrence mattered.

To divest control properly, leaders must implement the foundational principles of clarity and competence. Clarity is the result of having achieved the delicate balance between positional and personal power, coupled with the effective use of the framework visually depicted in Figure 1.

Leaders can ensure competence through task proficiency and certify through a process similar to teach-backs. The entire teach-back cycle is quite simple in theory. However, it requires immense effort from the chain of command to ensure followers are adequately trained and certified to carry out the assigned task, understand the mission, and grasp the commander's intent. Take, for example, the convoy briefing required before every nuclear weapon movement. The convoy commander delivers a lengthy, prepared script detailing, among other things, each maneuver, all verbal exchanges between key players, and any action to be taken by respective elements in the event of hostile contact. Competence and preparedness should not be passively assessed by an ability to show up for the convoy brief and take notes, but actively certified through a teach-back where the Airman is required to articulate their responsibilities.

For example, if a specific convoy truck commander is responsible for suppressive fire on the left flank of the weapon transport vehicle during hostile contact, the current

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<sup>39</sup> Dubner, "Freakonomics."

method calls for the convoy commander to ensure he simply outlines those maneuvers in their convoy briefing. Instead, a teach-back requires the truck commander to brief the convoy commander on precisely what they will do in the event of hostile contact, and to what end. This practice not only demonstrates their competence and preparedness, but also empowers the Airman to take an active role and develop a sense of purpose as a valued and critical member of an operation.

An example of deliberate action is the nuclear weapons maintenance process of "say a step, do a step." For example, technician one says, "Remove the cover." Technician 2 identifies the cover and says, "Noted," which, similar to deliberate action, allows both technicians to recognize a potentially incorrect procedure before they remove the cover.

## **Findings and Recommendations**

This paper has intended to deliver beneficial recommendations for addressing five of the most common challenges to instilling a sense of purpose in today's nuclear forces. However, it will not solve them all. Arguably the bedrock of a cohesive nuclear deterrent is a clear sense of purpose, one that gives real meaning to even the most repetitive and mundane tasks; however, the ability to meaningfully express that to their followers eludes some leaders. This paper attempts to provide a framework for nuclear commanders to instill a sense of purpose in their followers and unlock the full potential of America's nuclear practitioners. The importance of a sense of purpose in a robust safety and security culture, one that permeates all aspects of an organization, cannot be overstated.

It starts by merely formulating a purpose statement, which becomes the foundation for relevant mission and vision statements. Together they inform the commander's priorities, goals, objectives, and tasks, which in turn guide mission accomplishment, aid in achieving the vision, and fulfill the unit's purpose. The commander and their immediate leadership team must be invested in the model and routinely communicate it to every member of the organization.

In order to successfully implement the process and achieve the organization's purpose, commanders must develop the skills necessary to harness personal power from their followers, striking a seamless balance with the positional power bestowed upon them by law. Because every command is different and each experience unique, successful commanders must understand the role followers play and pay close attention to context and its bearing on the entire nuclear enterprise. Finally, leaders must recognize that empowerment is not bestowed but fostered. While strict adherence to guidance for numerous nuclear processes goes without question, layer upon layer of decision-makers, instructions, and processes stifles creativity, slows adaptation, and makes followers passive.

The following list of recommendations is by no means all-inclusive; however, it represents an essential start for instilling a sense of purpose in nuclear forces, and thereby improving the safety and security cultures required of an effective nuclear enterprise.

1. Incorporate methods of teaching the Model for Purpose-Driven Operations found in Figure 1 into formal military education courses at the Air Force Academy, Reserve Officer Training Corps, Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College, and Air War College.

2. Develop a means to measure followers' understanding of their purpose and its effectiveness in providing the bedrock for robust safety and security cultures. Questions may resemble those found in the IAEA Self-assessment of Nuclear Security Culture in Facilities and Activities, <https://www.iaea.org/publications/10983/self-assessment-of-nuclear-security-culture-in-facilities-and-activities>.
3. Provide a block of training on followership that recognizes the followers' role in the mission as being a complicated spectrum of engagement, which will better prepare commanders for the challenge.
4. Implement the divestiture of control inherent in the concept of mission command. Leaders at every level will recognize this as a challenging and risky prospect. However, they must give subordinates room to fail and recover in order that they may become more comfortable with pushing decision-making authorities to the lowest possible level.



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