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# ***ACCELERATE*** **CHANGE**

**OR**  
**LOSE**

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AIR FORCE CHIEF OF STAFF

As the 22nd Chief of Staff of the Air Force, I have surveyed the strategic challenges that lay ahead of us. The world is changing in many ways. Today we operate in a dynamic environment with factors that have us taking various actions to continue the mission and take care of Airmen and Families. As a result, we have a window of opportunity. Our Air Force must accelerate change to control and exploit the air domain to the standard the Nation expects and requires from us. If we don't change – if we fail to adapt – we risk losing the certainty with which we have defended our national interests for decades. We risk losing a high-end fight. We risk losing quality Airmen, our credibility, and our ability to secure our future. We must move with a purpose – we must Accelerate Change or Lose (ACOL), and the ACOL paper is the result of my detailed assessment. It outlines why the Air Force must accelerate change in order to remain the most dominant and respected Air Force in the world.

We must focus on the Joint Warfighting Concept, enabled by Joint All-Domain Command and Control and rapidly move forward with digital, low cost, high tech, warfighting capacities. Only through collaboration within and throughout will we succeed. The Air Force must work differently with other Department of Defense stakeholders, Congress, and both traditional and emerging industry partners to streamline processes and incentivize intelligent risk-taking. Most importantly, we must empower our incredible Airmen to solve any problem. We must place value in multi-capable and adaptable team builders, and courageous problem solvers that demonstrate value in diversity of thought, ingenuity, and initiative.

Our Nation has come to expect much from its Air Force, and we will rise to the challenge of tomorrow's highly competitive environment to deliver – but to do so, we must accelerate change now! The consequences of failure, and success, are profound. In the months ahead, you will see the Air Force lay out steps we will take to do this. All Airmen have a role in shaping our future. Together, we will succeed!



CHARLES Q. BROWN, JR.

General, U.S. Air Force  
Chief of Staff

## **ACCELERATE CHANGE OR LOSE**

**In an environment that includes, but is not limited to, declining resources, aggressive global competitors, and rapid technology development and diffusion, the U.S. Air Force must accelerate change to control and exploit the air domain, while also underwriting national security through nuclear deterrence to the standard the Nation expects and requires.**

We have known for some time that we need to change. The challenges described above, combined with the actions required to establish the U.S. Space Force, create a unique—but limited—window of opportunity to change. If we fail to adapt to the changes in the strategic environment, a large and growing body of evidence suggests that we risk losing in great power competition, a high-end fight, quality Airmen, our credibility, and the ability to secure our future. If we are to succeed, we must accelerate the change necessary for us to remain the most dominant and respected Air Force in the world.

## **Uncontested U.S. Air Force Dominance Is Not Assured**

Since DESERT STORM, the U.S. Air Force has enjoyed a historically-anomalous period of dominance, becoming an air force contributing to a joint force that is feared and envied around the world. Since the 1980s, we have grown accustomed to America's relative wealth, the ability of the U.S. taxpayer to fund the most exquisite capabilities, and time for industry to deliver—even while we executed nearly thirty years of continuous combat operations. For decades, American, allied and partner warfighters have felt safe with the top cover and strategic deterrence our air forces have provided; and for much of our existence as a country our Homeland has served as a sanctuary. These assumptions no longer hold true today.

Competitors, especially China, have made and continue aggressive efforts to negate long-enduring U.S. warfighting advantages and challenge the United States' interests and geopolitical position. While the Nation was focused on countering violent extremist organizations, our competitors focused on defeating us. They have studied, resourced, and introduced systems specifically designed to defeat the U.S. Air Force capabilities that have underpinned the American way of war for a generation. Future warfare will not remain far from our shores; we must be prepared to address our competitors' attempts to hold the U.S. Homeland at risk with unconventional, conventional, and even nuclear force. While we and industry previously enjoyed the benefit of time, when U.S. Air Force dominance seemed unassailable, we are now seeing competitors outpace our current decision structures and fielding timelines.

Air dominance is not an American birthright. Without the U.S. Air Force's unprecedented control of the air and enabling domains, no other U.S. military mission enjoys full freedom of maneuver. Therefore, it is no surprise that our competitors are posturing aggressively to first contest U.S. air superiority, reconnaissance, and strike capabilities, using advanced weapons systems to directly confront and deny U.S. Air Force combat power. Overseas, our Airmen will have to fight to achieve localized air superiority to enable joint effects. Potential adversaries are also competing in other ways, threatening our ability to generate air power—from initial concept, through acquisition and fielding of systems, and operations and sustainment—with the intent to deny our ability to project power globally.

Tomorrow's Airmen are more likely to fight in highly contested environments, and must be prepared to fight through combat attrition rates and risks to the Nation that are more akin to the World War II era than the uncontested environment to which we have since become accustomed. The forces and operational concepts we need must be different. Our approach to deterrence must adapt to the changes in the security environment.

While the creation of the U.S. Space Force enables greater focus on a key domain, it also requires greater integration across the services to deny competitors an exploitable seam between the high-ground domains and the cyberspace that connects and enables effects across them all. As Airmen, we must think differently about what it means to fly, fight, and win.

The warning signs have been blinking for some time. The *2018 National Defense Strategy* and the independent National Defense Strategy Commission both concluded that the international security environment is getting more competitive and dangerous with the return of great power competition and the erosion of U.S. military advantages. Recent publications from leaders and scholars across the national security community raise similar alarms regarding the erosion of U.S. warfighting advantages.<sup>1</sup> Appreciation for the scope of the challenge continues to build. Despite these calls to action, there is not yet sufficient urgency within our Air Force and national security establishment for the change that these documents prescribe. Our current pace of change will not suffice to maintain our advantage in combat or competition.

While the erosion of warfighting advantage impacts the entire joint force, it is particularly consequential for the U.S. Air Force, and so we must double our efforts to accelerate the changes necessary for our future success. The U.S. Air Force must adapt so that we can uphold our unique value proposition to the Nation—the ability to provide strategic deterrence and employ global effects on near-immediate timelines. Our contributions as an Air Force are critical to success in any high-end fight. In most scenarios, Airmen will be the first to respond to emerging crises, given our ability to project power from afar, independent of forward access or lengthy prepositioning timelines. In any scenario, the U.S. Air Force plays a unique and integral role to our collective deterrence and joint warfighting credibility with allies and partners. In the face of growing challenges, we must adapt and accelerate—now—to ensure our continued ability to best serve our Nation.

## **Good Enough Today Will Fail Tomorrow**

Airmen have performed the Air Force's five core missions superbly while executing almost three decades of near-continuous combat operations in relatively uncontested environments.<sup>2</sup> Past success, however, is no guarantee of future performance. Absent change, our presumed advantage will continue to erode, and the U.S. Air Force will not be adequately prepared for the warfighting challenges in contested environments. Absent change, our Nation will assume increasing risks to our mission and our forces.

Many of the requirements for capabilities that have underpinned our success were developed in the decade today's most senior leaders joined our Air Force. Since then, much has changed. Not only has the technology revolution dramatically changed the ways in which humans and economies interact in the world, it has changed the way militaries can develop and project power. Unlike the past, much of the emerging technologies that will determine our future are no longer created or funded by the Department of Defense. The processes with which we build capabilities for our Airmen have not adapted to these changes; the ways in which

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1 Recent examples include: Chris Brose's book *The Kill Chain*; Senators Inhofe and Reed's, "The Pacific Deterrence Initiative: Peace through Strength in the Indo-Pacific;" and Michèle Flournoy's "How to Prevent a War in Asia: The Erosion of American Deterrence Raises the Risk of Chinese Miscalculation."

2 Air Force core missions include: (1) air and space superiority; (2) intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); (3) rapid global mobility; (4) global strike; and (5) command and control.

we test, evaluate, and train with them do not meet current or future demands. While we have made progress, our Airmen need us to integrate and accelerate the changes necessary to explore new operational concepts and bring more rapidly the capabilities that will help them in the future fights.

To do this, we must contribute to the Joint Warfighting Concept, enabled by Joint All-Domain Command and Control, and place capability in warfighters' hands faster—through innovation, experimentation and rapid prototyping, and a collaborative approach with our service and industry teammates. We must also use this opportunity, given the stand-up of the U.S. Space Force, to evaluate and adjust internal U.S. Air Force structures and decision processes to include a renewed look at service-assigned roles and missions internal to the Department of the Air Force and even within the Joint Force. We must also consider how to achieve improved interoperability and data sharing with our closest allies and partners so that we can fly, fight, and win together. We should expand our network of like-minded Airmen from around the world, leveraging our common perspective against shared threats to present multiple dilemmas to our competitors and adversaries.

## **We Must Collaborate Within and Throughout to Succeed**

The U.S. Air Force is going to need help to effect the necessary changes. We must make a compelling case to external stakeholders, backed by defensible analysis and evidence, to divest or take risk in legacy missions and capabilities. The U.S. Air Force must work differently with other Department of Defense stakeholders, Congress, and traditional and emerging industry partners to streamline processes and incentivize intelligent risk-taking in support of the warfighter and the Nation. Navigating the challenging times ahead requires effective collaboration among all stakeholders to acknowledge, balance, and share risk over time—now and into the future. Collectively, we owe it to the American taxpayers to examine how we can provide greater value at an affordable cost to the Nation's defense. The U.S. Air Force will take the hard steps to do its part in service to the American people.

But first, we must candidly assess ourselves and address our own internal impediments to change. In doing so, we must acknowledge the realities of the fiscal environment to ensure that the U.S. Air Force is gaining the most value and being good stewards of taxpayer dollars. To be successful, the U.S. Air Force must continue its future design work and accelerate the evolution and application of its operational concepts and force structure to optimize its contribution to Joint All Domain Operations. Likely future budget pressures will require the most difficult force structure decisions in generations. We cannot shy away from these decisions.

The U.S. Air Force already faces increasing budget pressure based on growing costs of sustainment for current and aging force structure, continuous combat operations, and long-deferred modernization. While previous decisions were made with the best intentions reflecting perceived needs at the time, in aggregate, they do not deliver the outcomes we need today due to the rapidly-changing elements of the competitions with China and Russia. Learning from prior recapitalization and modernization plans, we must frame decisions with an enterprise-wide perspective. We need to examine our structures and decision-making to force the hard conversations and effect the changes we need.

In order to inform this ruthless prioritization, we must also consider our decisions in the context of the key competitions over time. As a Service, decisions on our missions and capabilities must be informed by how they fare against our understanding of competitors' theories of victory, ways of war, and force development strategies.

We must design our capabilities and concepts to defeat our adversaries, exploit their vulnerabilities, and play to our strengths. And we must be able to frame decisions and trade-offs with both a near and long-term view of what value our capabilities provide throughout the lifecycle of performance.

To do this, we must reframe platform-centric debates to focus instead on capabilities to execute the mission relative to our adversaries. Programs that once held promise, but are no longer affordable or will not deliver needed capabilities on competition-relevant timelines, must be divested or terminated. Cost, schedule, and performance metrics alone are no longer sufficient metrics of acquisition success. We must be able to account for the interactive nature of competition and continuously assess ourselves relative to our adversaries' adaptations. Capabilities must be conceived, developed, and fielded inside competitors' fielding timelines—knowing we will need to adapt and adjust over time. Innovative ideas from our Airmen need viable sustainment pathways. If we are to beat our competitors in conflict, we must also beat them in development and fielding of capability.

After decades of near-continuous combat operations, we must align Air Force processes and force presentation to better support readiness, the generation of combat power, and warfighting. We must also develop ways to enable our Airmen to rest, recover, and train for the future. Innovative Airmen are diligently building better ways to generate and present Air Forces to the Joint Force. Garrison structures and processes must align to these new models, eliminating unnecessary bureaucracy and redundancies, and repurposing manpower to emergent and under-resourced requirements. Our staff and service processes must not impede our Airmen's potential success; we owe our Airmen viable organizations at all echelons.

## **Empowered Airmen Can Solve Any Problem**

Finally, the U.S. Air Force must reexamine what attributes the Service requires to fight and win a high-end fight against a peer competitor. Successful operations and combat support in a contested environment demand maximum delegation, trust, and empowerment of Airmen *before* conflict starts. We must empower Airmen at all levels, delegating to the lowest capable and competent level possible, mindful that with empowerment and trust comes accountability.

Leaders at all levels must train to make quality decisions at the speed necessary for competition and combat timelines while creating an environment in which all Airmen understand their contribution to the challenges we must collectively solve. Leaders must develop future leaders who can do the same. Starting with recruitment and accession, and through all of our Airmen and leader development programs, we must develop the Airmen we need for the high-end fight. The U.S. Air Force must develop and build deep institutional understanding of China and Russia, and reward and retain those Airmen who foster the personal attributes necessary for success in the challenging future ahead.

Our Airmen must be multi-capable and adaptable team builders, as well as innovative and courageous problem-solvers, and demonstrate value in the diversity of thought, ingenuity, and initiative. We must develop leaders with the appropriate tools to create and sustain an environment in which all Airmen can reach their full potential, valuing the many aspects of diversity within our Air Force. Airmen who do not or cannot reflect these and the related attributes we value fall short of being the future Air Force leaders we require. These efforts must also enhance the quality of service and quality of life for our Airmen and their families, making the U.S. Air Force an attractive career choice for all Americans.

## **The Consequences of Failure—and Success—Are Profound**

If the U.S. Air Force fails to adapt fast enough, wargaming suggests mission failure and unacceptable risks to the Joint Force. The rules-based international order so many have fought to defend may disintegrate and our national interests will be significantly challenged. Unless we accelerate the changes we need, the U.S. Air Force will be ill-prepared to compete, deter, and win. Urgent actions are required now to secure the U.S. Air Force's continued ability to deliver global effects on strategically-relevant timelines. Demonstrating strength, adaptability, and resilience to primary competitors is necessary to deterring future armed conflict. Should deterrence fail, the U.S. Air Force must be prepared to fight in defense of America's interests—and win. Our Nation has come to expect much from its Air Force; we must rise to the challenges of tomorrow's highly competitive environment to deliver.

We have done this before, and together we can do it again. Today's U.S. Air Force, and its assumed dominance, was shaped by highly innovative and courageous Airmen throughout our storied history. Seeing the need for change, they forged new technologically-advanced force structures and developed novel operational concepts that paved the way for the many successes we have achieved. We can do it again. If we are bold enough, we can shape our future proactively vice reactively after experiencing catastrophic loss and potential defeat. To do so, we must accelerate change now, while we have a unique—but limited—window of opportunity.

***“Victory smiles upon those who anticipate the change in the character of war,  
not upon those who wait to adapt themselves after the changes occur.”***

**– Giulio Douhet**

