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Operation Enduring Freedom

An Assessment

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The attacks of September 11, 2001, thrust the United States into a no-notice war against Osama bin Laden, his al Qaeda terrorist network, and transnational terrorism across the board. The first round of this war was Operation Enduring Freedom, an air-dominated offensive conducted by U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) against al Qaeda forces in Afghanistan and against the Taliban theocracy that provided them safe haven. In less than a month and from a standing start, the United States commenced combat operations in a landlocked country half the world away. How did we do? A RAND Corporation study for U.S. Central Command Air Forces (CENTAF) assessed the planning and initial execution of the war, from October 2001 through March 2002. The study was conducted within the International Security and Defense Policy Center of the RAND National Defense Research Institute.

Highlights of Enduring Freedom

The plan was to rely on air power and precision weapons, aided on the ground by U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF), who would work alongside indigenous Afghan groups opposed to the Taliban and identify and validate targets for allied aircrews. The war began on October 7, 2001, with nighttime air strikes against preplanned targets such as Taliban airfields and headquarters facilities. By December, many campaign goals had been achieved and combat moved to the high-mountain caves at Tora Bora, where dispersed al Qaeda and Taliban fighters had fled. In pursuit of Osama bin Laden and fearing that the fighters might threaten the still-fragile interim government of Hamid Karzai, CENTCOM planned an initiative to capture or kill any enemy fighters who might be in the area. That initiative—Operation Anaconda—was led by conventional U.S. ground forces supported by SOF teams and friendly Afghans, who encountered unexpected enemy resistance as soon as they

Abstract

The United States conducted Operation Enduring Freedom from land bases and aircraft carriers positioned far away from the landlocked combat zone. Yet, al Qaeda's infrastructure and the supporting Taliban regime in Afghanistan were destroyed. Global communications connectivity and the common operating picture that was made possible by linking the inputs of unmanned aerial vehicles and other sensors enabled a close partnership between airmen and U.S. Special Operations Forces on the ground. Such networked operations are now the cutting edge of an ongoing shift in American combat style.

arrived. Fixed-wing air power had been largely excluded from Anaconda planning, but it was summoned at the eleventh hour when the plan was in danger of failing. Ultimately, after several days of nonstop bombing, the remaining al Qaeda and Taliban fighters were dispersed and the operation ended successfully, even though eight U.S. military personnel lost their lives to enemy fire. Hundreds of al Qaeda and Taliban fugitives escaped into Pakistan, and bin Laden was never captured or killed. However, al Qaeda's infrastructure in Afghanistan was destroyed, and the Taliban regime was brought down only 102 days after the terrorist attacks of September 11.

Distinctive Achievements

In all, Operation Enduring Freedom earned far more deserved accolades than demerits. First, never before in modern times had the United States fought a war from land bases and aircraft carriers positioned so far away from a combat zone.

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Distance required endurance: One B-2 mission lasted 44 hours from takeoff to landing, becoming the longest air combat mission flown in history. The logistics achievement of the campaign should also not be underestimated. Until the United States gained land access to Afghanistan through Uzbekistan, everything the military used had to be airlifted.

The war saw a further improvement of some important trends that began during the Gulf War a decade earlier. Precision weapons accounted for only 9 percent of the munitions expended during Desert Storm but nearly 70 percent in Operation Enduring Freedom. The war saw the first combat use of the new Global Hawk high-altitude, unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), the first operational use of Predator UAVs armed with Hellfire missiles, and the first combat use of the highly accurate, all-weather Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) by the B-1 and B-52. For the first time in modern warfare, airborne and space-based sensors provided a constant flow of information about enemy force dispositions and activity.

The greatest tactical innovation of the war was a unique air-land partnership that featured unprecedented mutual support between allied air power and ground-based SOF teams. Unlike traditional close air support that entails concurrent air and ground schemes of maneuver, SOF units in Afghanistan enabled precision air strikes against enemy ground forces even when there were no friendly ground forces in direct contact. This highly improvised partnership added up to a new way of war for the United States.

Problems in Execution

Operation Enduring Freedom also had inefficiencies. A distance covering eight time zones separated the two main facilities responsible for conducting the war: CENTCOM's headquarters in Florida and the forward-based Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) in Saudi Arabia maintained by CENTCOM's air component. More important, CENTCOM chose a familiar but arguably inappropriate template for conducting the war—that of the very different

Operation Southern Watch (OSW) that enforced the no-fly zone over southern Iraq. It was predictable that the OSW model's strict rules of engagement would clash with the needs of the Afghan war for innovation and adaptability in attacking time-sensitive targets. Also significant was the fact that target selection and approval was done at CENTCOM headquarters rather than in the CAOC. A target-approval bottleneck resulted partly from stringent procedures designed to avoid targeting mishaps. The CAOC accepted this constraint, but many airmen felt that it hampered their flexibility and allowed enemy leaders to escape as a result.

The Big Picture

Global communications connectivity and the common operating picture that was made possible by linking the inputs of UAVs and other sensors enabled a close partnership between airmen and SOF units and shortened the time from identification to successful target attacks. Such networked operations are now the cutting edge of an ongoing shift in American combat style that may be of greater revolutionary potential than was the introduction of the tank at the beginning of the 20th century.

On the other hand, the nation's expanded global communications connectivity has also allowed senior leadership to involve itself directly in the finest details of force employment. Politically sensitive wars like Operation Enduring Freedom may continue to require both stringent rules of engagement and centralized execution. However, there is an inherent tension between the imperatives of political control and efficiency in execution. Decentralized execution remains the preeminent virtue of American military culture because it constitutes the bedrock of flexibility. Doctrine and practice must find ways to manage the downside effects of improved information fusion lest the recent tendency toward centralized execution as the rule rather than the exception be allowed to undermine operational and tactical flexibility, one of the nation's most precious military advantages. ■

This research brief describes work done for the RAND National Defense Research Institute documented in *Air Power Against Terror: America's Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom*, by Benjamin S. Lambeth, MG-166-CENTAF, 2005, 456 pp., \$35, ISBN: 0-8330-3724-2, available at <http://www.rand.org/publications/MG/MG166/>. Also available from RAND Distribution Services (phone: 310.451.7002; toll free 877.584.8642; or email: order@rand.org). The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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