

# Letters

## Response to “Building a Good Instrument”

Reviewed by Group Captain Ian Shields

*Letter to the Editor*

Sir,

I read with interest Wg Cdr Miller’s well-crafted piece “Building a Good Instrument: Assessing the Likely Characteristics of Future Conflicts and Their Implications for the Air Component” in the Winter 2009 edition of *Air Power Review*. Hers is a welcome addition to the debate on where conflict might be headed, and how we might shape Airpower’s present direction in order to meet future requirements. I fully support Wg Cdr Miller’s assertion at the start of her article that trying to predict the future where warfare is concerned is fraught with difficulty (albeit that I would contend that its nature is unchanging, it is the conduct that evolves) but I do wonder whether there is an assumption in her piece that the next war will be largely more of the same and that we will undertake conflict that is recognisably in the same mould as present?

That present conflicts set the pattern for the future is a seductive argument. Asymmetric effect, the 3- (or 4-) Block War, Fourth Generation Warfare, Hybrid Warfare: they all seem to argue that the future is more of the same. There is considerable evidence that can be marshalled to support such a line, but predicting the future is a risky business, and

in terms of Defence we face three particular challenges. First, we are effectively talking of the Nation’s insurance policy, and we cannot afford to get this wrong. Second, there are no prizes for coming second in war! Third, and a point that Wg Cdr Miller rightly makes, with major pieces of military hardware lasting, from inception to retirement, in the region of half a century, we need to be careful with our wishes.

In particular, I believe that there are three reasons why we should be cautious about rushing too quickly into aligning our efforts too exclusively with the Counter-Insurgency (COIN) school of warfare as the only model for the future. My largest and most immediate concern is the threat that WME, and in particular nuclear weapons, represents. To counter such a threat we need credible and capable forces, including (one could argue especially as we offer a uniquely rapid response capability) Airpower. We must be capable of deterring, intervening and denying the threat that the proliferation of WME represents, and an air force that is configured too much towards undertaking predominantly COIN tasks may be poorly placed to undertake more demanding and high-end missions. Second, while the threat of state-on-state warfare as we recognise

it from the Twentieth Century may have receded, certainly in western Europe, all the growing threats that Wg Cdr Miller highlights from the Development Concepts and Doctrine Centre's (DCDC's) Strategic Trends work (such as globalisation, population growth and energy challenges) suggest increasing competition for resources. While we may not be called upon to fight for access to resources in a manner conventionally understood, and may not be challenged by what we currently recognise as a state (albeit we could be challenged by an actor with state-like properties, including the means and will to use violence for political ends), nevertheless if we need to defend our interests at range from the UK home base – be that for safe passage of goods or access to raw materials – we must have an air force that can undertake a wider range of roles, at distance and probably in heavily contested airspace; an air force more capable than one overly configured to COIN (demanding a role though that is). Finally, Wg Cdr Miller highlights how we are increasingly facing an asymmetric threat where technology is levered against us. I would contend, however, that there is nothing new in this (using trumpets to level the walls of Jericho was a devastatingly asymmetric effect) so let us be careful about drawing too many lessons from this facet of our opponent's adaptability.

So, while I support much of Wg Cdr Miller's analysis, I am uneasy with her suggestion that 'more low-end platforms' is the preferred direction of travel. While we must be aware of resource constraint and not "cry wolf", we should equally be ready to

argue forcibly that if history teaches us nothing else about the character of conflict, it is that the last and the present wars are more unlikely than likely to be the same as the next. The Royal Air Force only just got it right in the 1930s when there was what we can now recognise as clear indicators and warnings, but with ever-longer lead-in times to procure the latest equipment, can we afford the risk that an over-concentration on *the* war rather than *a* war might represent?

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