

# **Aerospace Advantage – Ep. 220: Airpower Perspectives – Advice for President Trump’s Defense Team – Transcript (AI-Assisted)**

**Doug Birkey:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Aerospace Advantage podcast brought to you by PenFed. I'm Doug Birkey, executive director at Mitchell Institute. Here on the Aerospace Advantage, we speak with leaders in DoD, industry, and other subject matter experts to explore the intersection of strategy, operational concepts, technology, and policy when it comes to air and space power.

This week, we're going to focus on key considerations the incoming Trump defense team, especially the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of the Air Force, should be thinking about when it comes to air power. Now, we focused on space power last week, so this week we're going to dig into priority issues that need attention when it comes to the air domain.

Now, while some of our observations may be new, others have been on the table for way too long and need attention now. I mean, think about it. It was the last decade when Secretary of the Air Force Heather Wilson declared, the Air Force is too small for what the nation expects of us. Since then, the service has gotten even smaller, older, and less ready as the world that's gotten way more dangerous. I mean, since she uttered those words, Russia invaded Ukraine, [00:01:00] Iran went on a rampage in the Middle East, and China, it's continuing to press hard in the Pacific. And the homeland is under threat in very new and dangerous ways, and we really haven't had to think about that since the Cold War.

And so we're in a zone right now where it's make or break. And I think we've got to emphasize the Air Force's role in it and why it must reset to deal with the challenges that exist in the world that's out there right now. So with that, I'm excited to have General Deptula, General Stutzriem, Mark Gunzinger, J. V. Venable, all from our team here to cover the issues. So with that, gentlemen, welcome.

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** Hey, great to be here as always, Doug.

**Maj. Gen. Larry "Stutz" Stutzriem, USAF (Ret.):** Hey, thanks, Doug.

**Mark "Gonzo" Gunzinger:** Hello, everybody.

**John "JV" Venable:** Absolutely. A pleasure, Doug. Thanks for having me.

**Doug Birkey:** So General Stutzriem help set the stage for us. What kind of world are we asking airmen to address when they take to the sky these days?

**Maj. Gen. Larry "Stutz" Stutzriem, USAF (Ret.):** Well, let's take a spin around a very complex threat environment and our airmen face some real challenges. As I talk about this, put it in the context of, are [00:02:00] we adequately deterring what our airmen are going to encounter? First, you've got the Russian invasion of Ukraine and that's really put Europe back on the map. It's a theater we can't ignore.

We know that, the collapse of Afghanistan and, the choices that Putin made to invade Ukraine, probably, because we telegraphed the lack of resolve. But we now have also seen the resurrection of this threat of nuclear war. And, uh, you know, we've had these, comments made by the Russians, at the very top of their leadership.

And it could be that they are willing to break, you know, a nuclear taboo that was established after the last use to nuclear weapons in 1945. And then let's go a little further, to China and, you know, what can we say there? They've declared the intent to change the world order. They're right now in the middle of a huge buildup of their defenses that [00:03:00] are primarily aimed at projecting force throughout the, uh, region.

But, engineered, especially the air defenses, engineered to counter the one remaining asymmetric advantage the United States has, which is its air power. They're also, building a, fairly sizable nuclear capability. Then we look at the Middle East. It's really more unstable than ever. And if we look at the recent seven front attack on Israel, which came out of nowhere, knowing that they were only prepared to sustain, you know, a couple of months of combat. And this is this went on for over a year. The carnage is great and there's been some amazing things, to see the airmen defend against What in other areas of the world is considered impossible, which is defending airbases.

And we now know that Israeli airbases were not closed because of air and missile attack by both drones and ballistic missiles by Iran. And then of course we saw [00:04:00] the Israelis, their air power really put Iran's defenses back. But, Iran is working hard as we speak today to set their tentacles across the Middle East.

So, they are not gone. we need to understand that they'll still be working against the West. North Korea, of course, remains very dangerous, and they are also committed to their nuclear program and their ballistic missiles. And they are increasingly aligned with Russia and China, which is another dimension of this threat preview or review, uh, in that there is increasing collaboration, to various levels among these threats.

Now there's a number of non state actors and airmen are going to get involved in a lot of that. Whether it's in the Middle East, Africa, or in the Western Hemisphere, don't forget cartels, transnational crime. This is nesting more than ever in proximity and in the homeland, and we don't have a lot [00:05:00] of people helping us in the Western Hemisphere, especially Mexico, in terms of trying to control that threat.

And then, Doug, as you know, we've talked a lot about the vulnerability of the homeland. You know, we've got Russia building bases up in the Arctic again, a new regime of stealthy cruise missiles and we are vulnerable, extremely vulnerable to air missile attack, uh, that originate in and through the Arctic.

And so airmen are going to be instrumental to both detecting and responding to threats that may originate or come through the Arctic. And once again, I'll, end on this, that, there's two dynamics. One is that there is truly a proliferation of nuclear ambition, and that's going to be all mixed into this, which makes it very difficult.

And the second thing is, once again, as I said, the collaboration between these threats.

**Doug Birkey:** Now, that's unreal. And you think about it, the Cold War was really challenging, but that was primarily against one major threat. [00:06:00] You just reviewed the concurrency, and it's not like you can really choose. I mean, we've got to pay attention to Putin.

We've got to pay attention to China, Iran, North Korea. You said it, the homeland. I mean, it's asking for everything all the time, and yet we're a fraction of the size that we used to be. So, General Deptula, pulling that thread a little bit, earlier this month, you addressed the state of the Air Force at an aerospace conference up in New York City.

Given what Stutz just laid out, what were your key points in that context?

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** Well Doug, obviously, I concur with everything that, Stutz mentioned. I'd just reiterate that the, uh, threats that the U. S. faces, are the most serious and most challenging that our nation's faced in our entire history. Not just since the end of World War II, in our entire history. And include the very real potential For near term major war, perhaps with China, but there is one thing that we've got a hundred percent batting average on, and that's predicting the next major regional conflict.[00:07:00]

So, conflict could very well.

**Doug Birkey:** And you mean we've been wrong every time, right?

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** Yeah, no one's predicted the next conflict that we'll get involved with. So, it very well could be war with one of the other countries that Stutz mentioned. Unfortunately, the Air Force has been in a force structure and readiness nosedive that does not bode well for being prepared for conflict inside the next 10 years, and perhaps beyond, depending on the resourcing decisions made by the Trump administration's Department of Defense and Department of the Air Force new leadership.

While our combat inventory and readiness continues to decline, all the while getting older all the time, the Chinese Air Force is the newest, the largest, and the most ready in their history, and they're getting better in each category.

President Trump has made it clear, we just heard him yesterday, that he believes in the Reagan era approach of peace through strength. So, the first order [00:08:00] of business in the new Trump administration at a macro level will be to halt and then reverse the decline in the Air Force's force structure. Second, to halt and then reverse the decline in Air Force readiness. And then resource the Space Force to meet the demands of the National Defense Strategy.

While we all address space more completely in a separate podcast, it's important to include it here because air and space are inextricably linked. Now, everyone, I think most folks on this podcast, are very well aware of why the Air Force is in the worst shape of all the services. We're about the only people in Washington who are aware of that fact.

And that's part of the Air Force's problem. Very few understand the decline that it's in. The bottom line is that the Air Force has been underfunded relative to the departments of the Army and Navy for over three decades. [00:09:00] Significantly underfunded to the point of neglect. In the 20 years post 9 11, the Army received over 1.3 trillion dollars more than the Air Force, and that's an

average of over 65 billion dollars a year more than the Navy received almost a trillion dollars more.

Now one of the reasons nobody knows that is because there's more than 45 billion dollars in the Air Force budget. That not one cent actually goes to the Air Force, but because that pass through is in the Air Force budget, it appears to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Congress, and the American people that the Air Force is actually the highest funded relative to the other services, when in fact it's not.

If you take that pass through out and put it where it belongs, the Air Force is actually number four in funding, behind the Navy, Army, and other Department of [00:10:00] Defense agencies. So, the next Air Force Secretary needs to be committed to insisting on transparency in all Department of Defense funding so that critical resource allocation decisions among the services can honestly be made.

I've got an entire list of priority recommendations for Secretary designate Meink to halt the Air Force's decline, and I'm sure we'll get to all of those before our hour is out.

But his first order of business must be ensuring transparency in addressing actual budget shares across all the services.

**Doug Birkey:** Now, I appreciate that. So, Gonzo, let's focus a little bit on solutions. Given what Stutz and Gen Deptula just laid out, what are the major muscle movements that you'd want to see out of the Air Force to build up their capabilities? I mean are there specific areas that would need to increase? How do you see this reflected across the modernization plan for the service?  
[00:11:00]

**Mark "Gonzo" Gunzinger:** Yeah, the short answer is the Air Force must modernize and grow its forces for every mission area it's responsible for, including nuclear deterrence, air superiority, long range strike, ISR, command and control, and of course, global mobility.

That's the result of three decades of force cuts and delayed modernization programs as well as inadequate budgets. The Air Force is now facing a modernization bow wave that it cannot afford, given it remains the most underfunded service in our military. And when I say underfunded, that's from a warfighting perspective, as well as a budget viewpoint.

Since the Air Force provides the air superiority, close air support, and of course mobility, that are absolutely critical to the success of all U. S. operations. No other military service, U. S. or ally can backfill what the Air Force brings to the fight. There are no alternatives.

Air Force air superiority, long range strike, global mobility, that's going to make the difference [00:12:00] between a U. S. victory and early defeat in a fight with China. And that's based on operational assessments, decades of it, not rhetoric. So, the new Air Force Secretary and Secretary should place their highest priority on increasing the capability and capacity of those forces as rapidly as possible.

So, for our listeners, imagine for a moment that you are the new Air Force Secretary. I'm going to speak to you. Mr. Secretary, your service continues to struggle to meet growing operational demands for airpower and simultaneously modernize within its available budget. That's why your airmen are suffering from readiness rates that are historic lows and must operate combat aircraft that have exceeded their planned service lives.

The fact is your service, you have the right requirements, but you can't meet them because of your limited resources.

**Doug Birkey:** Now, I really appreciate you digging into that. Stutz, I want to pull a thread here [00:13:00] on what Gonzo is just saying on capacity. You know, we really are ultra small at historic levels yet you gave us a laundry list of all the areas we got to track concurrently.

What does that mean about scaling?

**Maj. Gen. Larry "Stutz" Stutzriem, USAF (Ret.):** Oh, well, let me begin by saying, you know, cover this, first capacity matters and having advanced technology capacity matters even more. So, what does it mean in terms of military operations? First, capacity means you have staying power not to be held hostage in one theater. And as I talked about the number of threats and what General Deptula had said about those threats, it would be easy to be held in a theater while somebody else somewhere else in the world takes advantage of us.

Second, with capacity you can endure, and even if we think we have a technical advantage, you know, quote, Smaller, but better, unquote. It doesn't [00:14:00] account for unexpected attrition we're going to experience in high end conflicts, say with China. There's going to be fog and friction and at times things will

degrade until we adapt, and in those times, when we work to adapt, we need to have the resources to continue to fight. The alternative would be to quit or capitulate or surrender.

So what is the state of capacity? Let me give you a really simple analysis. And this was done by a former commander of air combat command with respect to fighter aircraft. He took, uh, the priorities, the demands of the national defense strategy on a list, big, long list. He then applied the number of fighters required to support that demand, and somewhere about a third of the way down the list, he runs out of inventory. That's an amazing, easy analysis to understand that your Air Force only has a fraction of what the National Defense Strategy is [00:15:00] tasking the Air Force to do.

Another, Doug, is bombers, and you know, this is our deep strike force. It holds at risk the things most precious to China, Russia, Iran, and perhaps at the same time. And we've got about 140 bombers, and we understand that at any one time, we're only going to get the engine started on about a third of those bombers.

And these bombers are entirely ancient, non stealthy, almost all, and unable to penetrate modern air defenses. Finally, I want to make the point that, especially when you talk about the Pacific, one can add up the expected deployment of fighters and bombers, but that doesn't mean 100 strike aircraft can strike 100 targets a day. The vast distances of the Pacific mean your strike density is very low.

For example, if you flew B 2s from Alaska or Australia, you might get one sortie every two or three days. And these old bombers, they are [00:16:00] old. They're going to break a lot more. So we need to buy aircraft at scale. Capacity matters. And we should be building to not a one war sizing approach, but two.

**Doug Birkey:** That is very compelling when you lay it out that way.

J. V., I want to turn to you. We oftentimes talk about capacity and scale, just talking about, you know, jets or missiles. Things like that, but the human element here is really, really important, and it takes many years to get a mission ready, pilot or a maintainer, that's seasoned that can really fix the jet under trying circumstances.

Can you talk us about this problem a little bit how we manage that capacity element the right capabilities at the human level?

**John "JV" Venable:** That's a big loaded question, and I'm grateful for it, Doug. I want to pile on to what the bosses said, Stutz and Gonzo, just, this is where we are right now. And what we're talking about is the tip of the iceberg.

You can only cover so much in a podcast, but I'm going to [00:17:00] run down the human capital side and talk to you about what it takes to create combat mission ready operator, that's a fighter pilot, a bomber pilot, controller on the ground, security forces man or woman that is guarding our bases.

But I'm going to use primarily my history and my understanding of takes to create a fighter pilot in the United States Air Force, and you can apply it across the spectrum. As you mentioned, Doug, and as everyone has talked about, it takes a while from funding to get an F 35 on the ramp or to get a LRASM into our magazine. About 2 to 3 years is about the optimum level right now, just because of the supply chain and the funding streams and how all that takes place.

General Deptula mentioned and Gonzo reemphasized how we need to prioritize this capacity thing and start acquiring these new weapon systems because of that timing. But what I'm going to tell you right now is it's much more [00:18:00] exacerbated when you start talking about bringing someone in the Air Force to fly an airplane. From the time you actually get someone to flight school until they get through the pipeline into their operational weapon system, be it a B 52 pilot or a, um, an F 35 pilot. It takes 2 to 3 years under optimum circumstances now to do that.

Our drought in flying time, our drought in flying hours is likely exacerbated that. But that's 2 to 3 years. Once you get them into an operational unit, they're novices. They may be able to go out and employ the airplane, but they're not able to lead people and they need to actually be led into combat.

And to have a supervisor over the top of them that's actually making decisions for them, guiding them and how employ their aircraft. In order for that person who's graduated from flight school to upgrade to a supervisory level, where they're able to actually guide [00:19:00] the actions of another individual in the fighter community, it takes 500 hours of flying time. Accumulated to do that. Back in the Cold War era that you could do that in 2 years, because pilots were getting 200, 250 hours a year. Today, pilots are getting 130 hours a year. And so it takes 4 to 5 years of flying experience in order for those people to upgrade. To go to the next level to be able to actually instruct folks to actually have that tier of of capability inside an operational unit used to take another 2 years.



Now it's 2 to 4 years. And so now you're looking at an operator coming into the service from the time they get into the service until the time they're at the highest end of their operational capability. It takes about 9 years under today's circumstances. And they're 1 to 2 years away from actually walking out the door if they so choose.

This is a [00:20:00] significant situation. And as long as our pilots are getting those draconianly low levels of flying time, we're going to continue to have slow upgrades, slow engagements of folks being able to maximize their potential. And if I was to look at the air battle management side, or, or to look at the bomber pilot side, they're all the same.

If you look at the recent accident reports, bomber pilots, the experienced ones are flying 1 sortie a month. Not one sortie a week like they should be flying, but one sortie a month and I don't care what you're doing or what occupation you have. You cannot maintain competency. Imagine being a professional football team and you're practicing 1 day a week, on average, one day a week. And you're supposed to go to a game and face off against a peer competitor who's practicing as General Deptula said and General Stutzriem said, they're, the Chinese are [00:21:00] now flying at the rates that we knew during the Cold War. They're flying 4 or 5 times a week, and we're supposed to be able to go in and master that football game? The odds are stacked against us.

**Maj. Gen. Larry "Stutz" Stutzriem, USAF (Ret.):** Right.

**Doug Birkey:** Yeah. It's unreal. And what's terrifying about what you're saying is if the balloon goes up and we got to go, it doesn't matter how much money you dump on the situation. You're never going to regain that time. And I think that's one of the most catastrophic things about we surrender time year after year, where we never get on top of this from a readiness perspective, capacity perspective, capability perspective.

And I mean, in World War Two, you think about it, much simpler time in terms of the systems in play and all that. But it really took until about the winter of 1944, before we actually got on the step with enough crews. And that was a total commitment by the nation. But again, much simpler deal to train a P 51 pilot versus a fifth gen pilot.[00:22:00]

And we almost lost the war in that span. For two years, they could only project enough force. To just hang on with their fingernails. That was way different than fighting to win decisively. And it wasn't till 44 that we could do that. And we're not going to be able to have those kind of tolerances in the future.

It's going to be play to win real fast, real intense. And by what you're saying, we risk running out of the qualified crews and not have the ability to reset. That's terrifying.

So, General Deptula, I want to turn to you and put your air commander hat on. I mean, we all know, we talked about it a lot. You planned the air campaign for Desert Storm with a much larger force in many ways, twice as large, if not more.

And that was a regional conflict. What we're talking about now are very large theater conflicts concurrently around the world. All of them essential taking into account what JV said, what Stutz says, can you talk to us about the scale issue from the air commander seat?

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** Yeah, sure. Doug. The [00:23:00] issue is scale, starting at the macro level is directly related to the demands of our national security strategy. Um, and most people don't get up to this level, but that's where we need to start. I would share with you that there are two enduring tenants of our national security strategies over the years, regardless of political party in power that have served the United States well.

First, that we will maintain sufficient military forces and capabilities and capacity to engage around the world to shape the environment to secure and promote peace and stability. And second, that in the event we do need to fight, we'll do so away from U. S. territory in a fashion that puts the other combatants value [00:24:00] structures at risk and be able to win more than one major regional conflict at a time.

Now the reason for that, just to elaborate a bit, is if we only plan to be able to handle one and our adversaries know that as part of a declaratory strategy, all that does is encourage adventurism, if in fact we do get involved in a single major regional conflict. In order to be able to accomplish both of these fundamental tenets that I laid out, we need a set of robust, capable, and ready forces with a rotational base sufficient to sustain those worldwide operations.

You know, it just drives me nuts when I hear uninformed Congress people, uh, who want to slash the defense budget to say uninformed ignorance. When they talk about it, they compare the U. [00:25:00] S. defense strategy to being more than the next seven or eight nations combined.

The next seven or eight nations don't have the same national security strategy of global engagement that the United States does. So, it is a non sequitur to make

those kinds of comparisons. Today, the United States Air Force has less than half the number of combat forces that than we had during Desert Storm and all the key trends are headed in the wrong direction.

If you look at total numbers of fighter squadrons, we're 58 percent less today. We had 134 in 91. We have 56 today. In terms of flight hours per month, we were flying 22, over 22 hours a month in 91. Today we're looking at 6.8. That's 70 percent less. And our average combat fighter [00:26:00] age is three times older than it was in 1991.

Now, going back to what Stutz started us off with, are the threats today greater than or less than what we faced in Iraq in 1991? Well, I'll give you the answer. They're very much greater. But our Air Force has less than half the combat forces to deal with those threats. Now, it's not just about the combat aircraft.

It also comes into the issue of munitions. In Desert Storm, the attack plans that I built applied about 5,000 weapons a day. Ten years later, when I had the good fortune of being the Combined Air and Space Operations Center Commander during Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, I got a call from the Pentagon about a month into the conflict telling me to ease up on the couple of hundred or so precision guided [00:27:00] munitions a day we were using because we were using up the JDAM inventory.

The situation today would be really stressed, given the significant and significance in the target base we'd have to deal with. So, scale really matters if you want to win. So, that's another priority the new Department of the Air Force Secretary Meink, uh, designate has to fix.

Build a stockpile of conventional precision munitions in advance of conflict. That's absolutely necessary because today's defense industrial base is simply unable to adequately respond to crisis. And by the way, we're never going to get that capacity back.

**Doug Birkey:** Now, and I think if you talk about, especially that thing about why is defense budget, you know, so much larger and all that.

And again, it goes back to what are our responsibilities with our global interests, but they're [00:28:00] also not factoring in what is the cost of losing? And right now, what everybody is saying is, if our back is against the wall, we don't have the capability or the capacity to truly win. The adversary gets a vote about when they toss a towel, and as Russia proves with what they're doing in Ukraine, not quitting is a viable strategy.

So, it's pretty easy just to run us out of Schlitz, and that is a very, very dangerous position which to be.

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** Yeah, and we do, what you hit on is some of the dangers that we encounter in the context of what we are nominally very, very guilty of. Uh, and that's mirror imaging. So, your point with the Russians is a very good one.

They don't have the same perspectives toward human life than we do. Putin doesn't care that he's losing a thousand or fifteen hundred people a day. He'll search anywhere to find them and throw them into the meat grinder. That's not the way the United States operates. What we need to ask [00:29:00] ourselves is how do we respond to that kind of a strategy?

**Doug Birkey:** JV, I want to pivot back to you. You've been doing a lot of research on readiness. In fact, we just did a podcast on it with you as lead a few weeks ago, which is awesome. And I commend everybody, if you haven't listened to it already. But I'm guessing it's a major priority in your mind right now for the new administration.

And I think it's really important here to thread the needle on this very carefully because people can cheat through readiness accounts and all that and it happens all the time. But there's a point when you actually cut into bone and you put the human capital side of the equation into a death spiral.

You put the equipment into a death spiral because things get so bad, so degraded. It's kind of like, your house, I mean, if you let the roof go too long, you're actually going to have the structure rot because you get water incursion. And given where the numbers that turned up to just went through and flying hours and things like that, I'm guessing we're pretty close to that right now.

Is that true?

**John "JV" Venable:** Yeah, it's in a bad state. think that I bin [00:30:00] readiness into three different categories. In order for a force to be able to go out and win it has to have the capacity, the capability, and the readiness of machinery and the manpower to go out and execute the mission. General Deptula and Stutz have done a great job talking about the capacity and the capability, the modernization, how technically adept and advanced are our fighters.

And our bombers, but the readiness posture of our combat units is another thing entirely. The average pilot in the United States Air Force is flying 6 times a month right now. Roughly 1 and a half times a week. The service's own demands for minimum sorties in order to be considered ready are eight sorties for an experienced pilot and nine for a new guy coming into the unit.

And so they're either batting 75% or 66%, depending on which one you're looking at on the minimum. They're not making the minimums in order to be considered ready. and I [00:31:00] talked about this earlier. Imagine a football team going against the Chinese. A Chinese football team that's practicing every day of the week, and you only get one rep a week.

It's not, those odds are not good. The aircraft are also in really bad shape. The average mission capable rate in the United States Air Force is around 60 percent for its fighters, and it's less than that for its bomber fleet. What that means is for every 10 aircraft on the ramp, six of them are capable of executing one of the of the units missions that it has, and it's a doc statement. One of them. Today that those numbers are baffling considering the overall capacity that we have in the service being the smallest in its history.

It is also the least ready with regard to its aircraft. The reason why they're so poorly kept right now is twofold. The maintenance side, the maintainer, aspect of it. How many maintenance [00:32:00] personnel do we have that are fully qualified to go in and fix these aircraft is one side of it. And the other one is spare parts. How much of our, equipment do we have to go in and pull right off the shelf and then swap a box for a box? And how many times are we waiting for that box

or a repaired box to come back in. The Air Force has been funding flying hours at a rate that is equivalent to the sequestration days of 2012. For the last 12, 13 years, they've been funding at the same rate, but they've been funding spare parts at between 80 percent of the requirement to fly all those hours and 85%.

And so the draconian low number of flying hours, the Air Force is funding. It means that units can't even fix the airplanes to fly them at that rate. So, what does all this add up to is if you were to take a fully mission capable [00:33:00] fighter squadron or bomber squadron, that means that they're capable of doing all of the mission set that that unit has in it's doc statement. It's operational capability statement of the things that it's supposed to be able to do. In 2016 General Dave Goldfein said that there were 4 of 32 active duty fighter squadrons that were capable of doing all of its missions. Today, because of the

low mission capability rate of both the aircraft and the aviators, there's not a unit in the United States Air Force that's capable of executing all of its missions.

Most of them are down to at least some, if not less than half of their missions. And Doug, as you know, when you're not capable of doing all of your missions, it's the number 1 mission that you're not able to do, which is to go out and engage a peer competitor and defeat them on the battlefield. And so there are cases that I can point out later of specific engagements that I've [00:34:00] had conversations that pointed out.

But there is no unit in the Air Force that's capable of going out and executing its mission right now, to defeat a peer competitor. And that ought to, put hair raising on the back of a lot of people's necks right now.

**Doug Birkey:** if you think about it, we've had periods of time where in the Cold War, we were a smaller force, but we were really proud of the training.

And so that was going to save us. And there are also eras where, okay, we're going to be smaller, but we're going to have way more capable systems. And so we're going to get them that way. Right now, we're eroding all of those principles. So, now we're a small, not ready force and we've got really old stuff. And so you can cheat maybe one of those, but you can't cheat them all across the board.

Gonzo and Stutz, I want to pivot back to you. You served during the Cold War, obviously, when we really last looked at serious peer competition with existential interests on the line. Talk to us about what readiness and modernization looked like back [00:35:00] then and some of the lessons learned you absorbed in those early years of your career and what you would offer up to leaders today when they take office?

**Mark "Gonzo" Gunzinger:** Hey Stutz, I think Doug just called us old.

**Maj. Gen. Larry "Stutz" Stutzriem, USAF (Ret.):** Yes, I think so.

**Mark "Gonzo" Gunzinger:** So, one lesson I learned from years routinely flying my 13 hour training sorties and B 36s... It's a joke, it's a joke. And spending every third week on nuclear alert, and that's not a joke, was our Air Force must remain ready to fight tonight.

Mission readiness was everything. So, our military moved away from maintaining that kind of fight tonight readiness after the Cold War. And, you

know, that wasn't unreasonable given the contingencies the services were asked to prepare for were far more discretionary in nature. But! And a big but. That's not the case today.

China is now capable of launching a campaign of aggression in the Pacific with little prior warning, and the cost of a U. S. military failure to defeat it would [00:36:00] threaten disability of our rules-based international order, nothing short of that. A major US defeat in the Pacific. We give China the upper hand in a fight to replace the US as the world's leading economic military power.

So, the new administration is right to focus on war fighting, lethality, meritocracy, standards and readiness to Pete Hegseth. But war fighting ethos is not enough. History has shown that it's a critical advantage in war, but it cannot compensate for a force that is undersized. And technologically out matched. A laser focus on warfighting must be accompanied by larger defense budgets that will grow the capabilities and capacity of our military.

**Doug Birkey:** I want to jump in and say something too. When you talk about China displacing us, that's not just swapping like, you know, Oh, the United Kingdom and then the U. S. rises up and all that. Yeah the value sets pretty aligned, whatever, you know, lights come [00:37:00] on the next day, no problem. This is a fundamentally different set of values and perspectives. And let me tell you, Americans are not going to like those kind of values. Ask the people of Hong Kong how they like life right now.

I mean, it is radically different in ways that are seismic and existential, and we cannot emphasize that enough.

**Mark "Gonzo" Gunzinger:** Shack, absolute shack.

**Maj. Gen. Larry "Stutz" Stutzriem, USAF (Ret.):** Yeah, I want to pull on a thread of what Gonzo said about fighting tonight or being prepared to fight tonight. You go back to the Cold War, my first decade as a fighter pilot, what a, different environment. And it was all about, two things, continued vigilance and frequent readiness exercises. And they were tough. We had inspector generals back then that were black hatted. And, you know, you'd be recalled. You were expected to generate your aircraft on no notice. Your operation security, that is your comms and things, were [00:38:00] evaluated, to make sure you didn't spill what was going on.

And then the training, the actual exercise, you would deploy, you would reconfigure aircraft for combat lines and then you'd fly and be graded on how

well you did that in some deployed location. And all this time it was very realistic, you know, simulated airfield attacks. And of course your crews would have to go out and fix the runways simulated.

Sometimes they'd actually dig out a hole and force them to do it for real. And then we did a chemical warfare, and had to wear this, you know, charcoal garb, both, on the ground and in the cockpit.

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** And it was hot.

**Maj. Gen. Larry "Stutz" Stutzriem, USAF (Ret.):** And it was hot and it was tough. And I think General Deptula, you know, being part of that, in fact, the same time in this, over in the Pacific, this was really serious stuff.

I mean, you know, we watched as young guys, commanders, wing commanders that were fired. For not being on the step of readiness with their guys, of stumbling [00:39:00] on this. I mean, it was serious stuff and the incentives were that you were good at that. So there's no sit around time. We studied a lot about their adversary, what they flew, how they flew.

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** And by the way, uh, just to interrupt here to emphasize your point Stutz, we used to laugh and make fun of adversary pilots that, you know, got less than 10 hours a month flying time. And here we are, if you all in the audience recall, the statistic, just recently quoted. Here we are flying at that rate, actually lower, much lower than that rate.

**Maj. Gen. Larry "Stutz" Stutzriem, USAF (Ret.):** And for some of us, we didn't know that was happening, for a while in the Air Force when we found out about it was just shocking because one of the secrets to American air power dominance is the fact that we train so hard. That we do, had, this ethos and I'll just say that's not the culture the Air Force has today.

It [00:40:00] has to get back to that because even if you infuse it with capacity and modern capability, you have to restore that vigilance and ready to fight tonight, Gonzo, you said it's number one.

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** Well, it reminds me of a saying that General Jumper used to use when he was the chief of staff. He used to say, Hey, look, you can take, this is when we had, the aircraft advantage in terms of, maneuverability and other elements of superior over, our adversaries.



And he used to say, look, we could trade places. You could take a U. S. fighter pilot and put it in an adversary aircraft and we'd beat the adversary pilot flying a U. S. aircraft every day. And he said that because he was emphasizing what you just talked about. Our key element that we rested our laurels on for decades was that, yeah, we might be outnumbered in terms of capacity, but we had better training [00:41:00] and we can no longer say that.

**Maj. Gen. Larry "Stutz" Stutzriem, USAF (Ret.):** Yep. Yep.

**John "JV" Venable:** And we had the absolute will to fight. We were so confident that we could take on the Russians that we were ready to go at any minute. We had the flying time. We had the training exercises. We knew it from start to finish. And today it's so different boss, I interviewed a bunch of pilots at Spangdahlem in 2016 said you're flying 1.4 sorties a week are you ready to go to war? And every pilot said, absolutely. I'm ready to go to war today. And I said, okay, the balloon goes up. You're sent as a SEAD squadron to go and take on Kaliningrad, one of the most heavily defended places in the world. And you're ready for that. And every pilot from lieutenant to squadron commander said, Oh, no, not that. There would be too many casualties involved with that.

The attrition rate would be too high. We wouldn't go there. And this was a guffaw for me [00:42:00] that that mindset, that culture seems to have shifted in a very bad way.

**Maj. Gen. Larry "Stutz" Stutzriem, USAF (Ret.):** Yeah. If I could add one last thing and, and, uh, General Deptula, I'm curious how you think about this. But in the mode, the Air Force has been in now for about 25, 30 years.

You don't have the warfighter leadership at the colonel and above level that has been brought up under this expectation that you will learn how to lead, to be vigilant, to exercise tough. And have that exercise experience of having to do that. It's just, it's, it's not in the system. And of course, in the last 20 years or so, there's just been such a concentration of power out of the air operation center, directing traffic.

There's not been any requirement to get back into that. So I don't know if you think that's a, a deficiency. I see it perhaps.

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** Yeah, I know. I would agree with you a thousand percent Stutz. [00:43:00] We have unfortunately and this gets into an area we could do an entire separate podcast on this topic. And I'm speaking very candidly here now.

We used to embrace the notion of centralized command, decentralized execution. We have modernized that to, centralized, command, distributed planning, decentralized execution. But the fact of the matter is, we evolved in these wars of counterinsurgency operations, very, very highly centralized into adopting the former Soviet model of centralized command, centralized execution.

So, we've raised a whole generation of folks who don't have the responsiveness or the training to be able to operate in distributed, or decentralized manner.

**Maj. Gen. Larry "Stutz" Stutzriem, USAF (Ret.):** Yeah.

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** But rather wait to be told what to do.

**Maj. Gen. Larry "Stutz" Stutzriem, USAF (Ret.):** Yeah.

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** That is a [00:44:00] recipe for failure and it has to be reversed. Well said.

**Doug Birkey:** I just want to jump in and can bring this to the higher level and pull a lot of threads you guys are talking about, and that is fundamentally service identity. For the last 20 plus years, the Air Force and Guardians and space professionals were part of that for a long time.

It was really support entity. And I think there's got to be a radical rethinking of identity where people have got to wake up and realize the apex of the solution, the way to their responsibility is going to come down to air power and space power, and it is every airman and every guardian's responsibility to champion and challenge others who don't believe about why these unique attributes that bring the equation, why it's so important, what air power and space power do.

I mean, it is absolutely foundational for national security, and these are complex skills, and it really, really demands everything to make it happen. This is not easy. And so I've never met a Marine [00:45:00] that says, you know, today's not a good day to discuss opposed beach landings that I don't want to go there. That might offend somebody.

And yet I meet airmen and guardians who negotiate against themselves every single day and say, well, I don't want to be a Mitchell zealot. I don't want to get out too far. That's not my lane. Are you kidding me? It is your moral imperative to understand why you matter. how you matter, and roll up your sleeves and fight.

And if you don't, that's how you end up with multi decade invasions. The other piece here is that the facts are on your side. You know, if you look at the China fight against Russia, what we're dealing with in Iran, these are air and space dominant. You have got to argue and be comfortable for doing that.

And, you know, there's a final point here too. There's this notion, we've said a lot over the last 20 years, I'd see it on the Hill all the time, especially with the Army, where our guys are [00:46:00] bleeding. Well, I kind of go back to Patton, he was right. The objective here is to win smartly, not just die. The point is to make the other guy die.

And so let's stop it with this last tactical mile bluster. I mean, airmen and guardians, they've done their share. I mean, we lost more members of the 8th Air Force in World War II than the entire Marine Corps did in the Pacific. You know, names like San Miguel, Schweinfurt, Tokyo, Migalle, Thud Ridge, they mean something.

And that's airmen given they're all, a heck of a lot of them dying or ending up as POWs. We've given it the office. On the space side of the equation, I can think individuals like Tom Stafford, Buzz Aldrin, Gus Grissom, who pushed it to the absolute edge in expanding what space power meant. And you look at Gus Grissom I mean he gave it all in Apollo one in that fire.

It's horrific, but he did it and we don't have anything to apologize for we've done it. But we also have better Solutions that can bring to the table and we've got to bring some swagger on that [00:47:00] and some willingness to commit and fight. But what does everybody else think about that?

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** Well, let me jump in there Doug first.

It's illuminating to realize that no more than a handful of officers remain in the Air Force today who served in our last major theater conflict, Desert Storm. The vast majority have only known the counterinsurgency operations conducted in Iraq and Afghanistan that they participated in. These were entirely different operations from what will be required to fight and win against a peer competitor.

Now, to kind of tag on to what you, brought up some of the writings and discussion coming out of Air University and in military journals and publications ignore or erroneously discount offensive counter air where there's virtually no discussion on the necessity of conventional strategic [00:48:00] attack against key centers of gravity that will be necessary to win.

This is very concerning, and it needs to be addressed by refocusing study of what's required to win in a major theater conflict. And studying how to win, as we did in Desert Storm as a last example, not how to lose, as we did at the strategic level in Iraq and Afghanistan. Now, Paula Thornhill and Lieutenant Colonel Shane Praisewater recently wrote an article entitled U. S. Air Force Culture Needs a Reboot.

I commend it to everybody listening. In it, they state that general officers have assumed some fights are unwinnable, so the best the U. S. Air Force can do is participate in operations rather than train to defeat an adversary. Second, there's too [00:49:00] much focus on standoff weapons. And third, a profound lack of knowledge, much less critical understanding of Air Force history. Emphasis is on something that they're calling now pulsed operations and standoff weapons and tactics suggest that Air Force leaders believe that the threat can only be managed, not defeated. That attitude needs to change, and airmen need to get back to identifying and solving complex operational problems, and reaffirming that they are the ones that hold an essential key to victory.

**Mark "Gonzo" Gunzinger:** So, real quick, about 10 years ago, I was asked to join a small group meeting with the Air Force's undersecretary, and the under wanted to pick our brains on how we could help airmen feel proud about the fact that the Air Force was performing as a support force to the Army in Iraq and Afghanistan. [00:50:00] So others in a small group offered their thoughts on that while I kind of sat there with my mouth hanging open.

And when it was my turn to speak, I said, hey, that was the wrong question. The real issue was how to ensure America's airmen understood that the Air Force is a war winning force and the air power is inherently offensive in nature and not an adjunct to other services. And the reaction in the room was, uh, what you'd expect if someone had thrown a nasty object on the table.

But my point is, I'm concerned that school of thought took root in the Air Force over the last 20 years. And we see echoes of it today in the service's planning documents, reports, and uh, even explanations of the service's new force design. It really appears at times that if some Air Force leaders are more concerned, as you said General Deptula about how not to lose a war with China, then how they can win it.

And that might explain why some are giving up on strategic attack, which would, [00:51:00] again, cede China's interior's operational sanctuary to its forces.

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** Yeah, they just, I mean, I mean, it goes back to a lot of this is expertise. If you haven't participated in something, this is why understanding Air Force history is so important.

And you, if you haven't participated in or experienced something, then you study those that have and learn from that. And of course it has to be adopted to the particular exigencies of the threat and the capabilities that exist today. But we need to get back to basics in the Air Force.

**Maj. Gen. Larry "Stutz" Stutzriem, USAF (Ret.):** Let me just add too going back to the threats we discussed at the front end. If you, if you don't believe that the United States is headed for a peer conflict, you're just not, conscious. Our ability to deter has been eroded and our threats are racing. So if you're a military service, any military service, and you're in this stew of threat [00:52:00] today, all should be oriented toward making sure every, in this case, airman or guardian, as you brought up, Doug, are consumed with understanding air power, how to practice it, how to teach it, how to defend it, how to advocate, it toe to toe, how to recognize when it's being misused.

How to communicate, how it can be best used. And right now we don't have a history, program, Air Force history program at the Academy. Our air university, there's lots of stories about people on the faculty wanting to expand the horizons of, Hey, well, let's consider how weak or ineffectual, or let's challenge the role of air power and Desert Storm, or let's challenge the role of air power, in the Pacific.

That needs to be purged because if we're going to fight in the next couple of years, we got to be single minded. And ready to fight tonight. So, there are some [00:53:00] things culturally within the air force. I think need to bend and break, uh, and possibly be rebuilt.

**Doug Birkey:** You know, and I think too, that that goes to the idea of communications and internally, it's about equipping airmen and guardians with the courage of their convictions and backing them to go to the table on that and truly making sure they understand because the facts are on their side.

And that's why things like General Alvin's op ed from the last week, where he really leaned forward that the Air Force is important, needs more resources and all that, that's very important, because not only is he making an argument, but he's signaling that it is okay to lean in with that, that kind of, uh, case.

And I'd also wag a flag, or wave a flag caution here, and the Air Force leadership spent the last year talking about And I get it. That's important. But last time I checked, reorgs don't win wars, and nobody joins a service to be part of a reorg. They strap into a jet, they fly into harm's way, and hopefully they prevail, get the mission job [00:54:00] done, and come back home safe.

Congress, they're not going to double down on fixing things like readiness or procurement, you name it, based on the reorg. So, we need to get leaders back to talking about the fundamentals and really bringing forth that warfighting view. And then externally, it may hit this fast because I know we're getting tight on time.

But we need to really talk about smart engagement around this town. For too long, the Air Force, and I'd say the Space Force, have been very defensive. They go to the accident that already happened. This member of Congress is upset. I gotta go calm him down. Or this just blew up on me. Let's stop doing that and start thinking a couple plays down the table. You know, here's an example for the first time in like ever that I can remember we've got senior members of Congress who have fundamental equities.

The speaker of the house is a bomber guy he has barksdale the senate majority leader is a bomber guy he's got Ellsworth. [00:55:00] Uh, last time I checked, that's a pretty good thing. What are we actually doing to capitalize upon that in terms of strategy? What are other coalitions we're building out there to move the ball forward?

There's a reason why members of Congress have really embraced the shipbuilding account thing with the Navy. And they're right, the shipbuilding thing is hugely important, I'm a fan of that. But we don't hear anything on air power or space power enough. And so we've got to develop this, but it takes some serious cultivation and stop this reactionary stuff.

And then the media is a key part of that too. It's a force multiplier and they've got to lean in and build these relationships with the reporters. And it takes a long time and get the trust, but they got to invest in this and it can't just be the ultra safe talking points. It's got to be real.

**Mark "Gonzo" Gunzinger:** Hey, Doug, let me throw in something about the nuclear triad.

We haven't mentioned that too much. Now, the Air Force is responsible for two of the three legs of our nuclear triad, and those two legs are aging out. We have

1970s era [00:56:00] Minuteman III ICBMs in the silos. And we have nuclear capable air launched cruise missiles that were never designed for today's threat environment.

Now, every administration since the 60s has said the triad is a foundation for our nation's defense. It underpins everything else our military does. But we have neglected nuclear modernization since the Cold War, and we must now get on with the job. And that's going to require additional resources. The Air Force can't play this Rob Peter to pay Paul.

It modernizes conventional forces, and modernizes nuclear forces, and increase it's readiness, and everything else is responsible to do it at the same time. And there's no, no, no margin for delayings to our nuclear modernization.

**Doug Birkey:** That's huge. And Gonzo, I just want to pull the thread in that a little bit more because everything we're dancing around ties to money in many ways.

And you were the lead person on two of our most impactful reports, and they both dealt with Air Force [00:57:00] resources, you know, need for more money. Could you walk us through those circumstances and really what leaders today that are coming to office should think about to help improve those odds?

**Mark "Gonzo" Gunzinger:** Sure. Well, the, uh, again, the short answer is the nation needs more Air Force. That requires more resources.

Now, I said the Air Force remains the most underfunded service, and we've published reports showing that's been true for 30 years. Compared to other services, the Air Force absorbed the biggest hits to its budget after the Cold War, and the damage it created has never been remedied. But you wouldn't know that if you relied on DoD's official budget documents, because they still show the Air Force's budget share is commensurate with the Army and Navy's share.

That's because DoD includes about 45 billion, a number that grows every year. And the Air Force's budget that the Secretary of the Air Force cannot spend on new aircraft, on readiness, and other requirements. That 45 billion just passes through the [00:58:00] service's accounts on the way to other DOD organizations.

The Air Force has no control over it. So, how can we ask our Congress to make informed decisions on a defense budget with that kind of erroneous

information? And, uh, real quick, let me talk about, um, uh, the National Defense Strategy 2018. You know, Secretary Mattis decided in 2018 that the new construct for sizing our military should be a single war instead of two wars. Which had been the case for decades before 2018.

Why? Because it is imperative that we deter a second aggressor when we are involved in a war in another theater. But that was assumed away on the basis that Secretary Mattis thought the U. S. military could no longer afford a two war force. Well, guess what? We now see Russia engaged in the largest war in Ukraine since World War II.

We see China in the Pacific [00:59:00] becoming increasingly aggressive and all but telegraphing that they're going to make a move on Taiwan. We see the formation of this new axis of evil, as it's been called, with China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. So, how can we continue to wish away preparedness to deter or fight and win a second war on the basis of a few dollars?

**Doug Birkey:** That's incredibly well said. Another part of the equation here is roles and missions discipline. General Deptula, you've got a lot of experience in that. And we can't have every service trying to do every single mission. There's a point where some are more effective and better stewards of resources.

Thoughts on that?

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** Yeah, Doug, this is a topic we could speak for hours about, literally. And you're absolutely right. First, let me set the conditions here. I've had the good fortune of being a joint task force commander twice, and I've actually commanded soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines in combat. And I believe that we [01:00:00] need the strongest Army, Navy, Air Force, Space Force, and Marines in the world.

But that does not mean that the Department of Defense, and nation, should not shift our limited resources to where they are needed the most to meet the challenges that we face. Right now, today, the United States Army is spending billions of dollars on hypersonic long range missiles that are too threatening for allies to host in peacetime and too heavy to deploy in wartime.

And quite frankly, that fulfilled the mission that's a role of the Air Force. A red flag should be thrown on that. Second, The Army's building its own satellite constellations for organic use. That's not joint. That's a Space Force mission. So, they ought to throw a red flag on that. Third, the Army has built multi domain



task forces that are clearly the prerogative and [01:01:00] role of the combatant commanders.

Not the army component. So, instead of poaching on these mission areas that are rightfully belong and other services and with the COCOMS, they ought to be spending on their own roles and missions where they can actually contribute to joint force operations. Missions like air and missile defense. That's just a tidbit of an introduction of to what needs to occur inside the Department of Defense with a new administration coming on board.

The new administration needs to set as their number one priority an honest roles and missions review among all the services. And by the way, uh, we haven't had a roles and missions review since we've had the newest service come on board, the Space Force. So that's another impetus, uh, for calling for an honest roles and missions review.

**Doug Birkey:** Now, it's so important, and it kind of reminds me of what happened in sequestration, where the Air Force, desperate for cash, [01:02:00] was going after the A 10 to sunset it. And the Army, at the same time, was buying new Apaches, but the A 10 is a far better close air support aircraft. And that's because we weren't doing a comparison.

You know, outside the stove pipes. And so we're killing the grade a option and buying something that was costly and not as effective. And this is what happens when you don't have discipline and really look holistically missions. Okay. So, we're at the end. I just want to do a lightning round going around the table here.

We've all made these pitches before, and quite often we get eye rolls and people go, well, it's just too hard. It's never going to happen. You got to temper your expectations. What do you say to people that do that? Stutz, let's start with you.

**Maj. Gen. Larry "Stutz" Stutzriem, USAF (Ret.):** Well, I think there's a lot of hope. I'll point out that, and you brought this up, Doug, about four days ago, chief of staff of the air force, uh, dropped an op ed, which, I would say was stunning for the rarity of the Air Force actually making a public [01:03:00] statement like that.

And, uh, it really expresses, you know, the contrast in maybe the last period of the Air Force being unwilling to really advocate strongly for increased budget share and modernization. And you know, some of the things, uh, uh, General Allvin said, and that was, I mean, what we've been saying, uh, the fleet is

smaller and older than any time in history and the gap between high end combat training and that of our pacing competitors, China has closed dramatically.

And then he says in his article, Hey, the sons and daughters of America deserve the best training weapons and equipment so they can fly, fight, and win. And come home. And, and he says decisively, they do not have those right now. And uh, he finishes the article by saying to fix all this, our airmen and America itself, needs more air force.

Now let me tell you, if this is the beginning of an age of speaking truth to leaders on the Hill, in the White [01:04:00] House, to the American people, this is good for the air force. And I hope it trickles down and it sets a new mode of operation that we have airmen truly advocating, uh, in the time of risk we're in today.

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** Okay. So, last week, I had a doctor's appointment. When I met my doctor, she told me that she'd just listened to the podcast from December where I went through the description of the Air Force as the oldest, smallest, and least ready in its history. She told me she was shocked and then quoted back to me my explanation that Gonzo just went through with you all of the 45 billion dollars in pass through and the negative impact that's had on properly resourcing the Air Force. She repeated to me examples of the geriatric age of our aircraft and she told me she was just flabbergasted that the Air Force was that bad off. And then she told me that in reality, she actually thought we had the strongest and the most modern air force in the world.[01:05:00]

And then she quoted the statistics that the Air Force had been funded less than the army and the navy for 30 years in a row. I was amazed at the impact those facts had on her. The reason I bring this up is the average citizen is simply not aware of just how seriously our Air Force has declined. The impact that message had on her just reinforces that we need to keep repeating it over and over and over again.

**Mark "Gonzo" Gunzinger:** Yeah, I'll, uh, I'll pile on. I think, uh, something Stutz said uh, about General Allvin's, uh, op ed is right on target. American people, I'll tell you that we have the best airmen, sailors, marines, and soldiers, Coast Guardies, in the face of the earth, no question about it. We owe them the best kit for them to go to war, to deter, to fight, and to win if necessary.

Because if we don't provide them with the training, we don't assure they have the readiness, and they don't have the equipment [01:06:00] they need to do that, then we are going to see results that would just horrify you.

**John "JV" Venable:** Well, let me start with Doug. You, you did a great job of talking about, congressmen and senators having weapon systems in their area and how we can go and advocate to them over, uh, the situation of the Air Force.

I think there's one area where readiness is challenged in that conversation. Let me go back and say, I think that that still leaves an area where we're challenged and that's readiness has no constituency. It doesn't bring money into an area. It actually expends it on the airmen and training and bringing them up to speed in a war fighting capacity.

I think we need to dwell there.

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** Very good.

**Doug Birkey:** Gentlemen, I can't thank you enough. And again, people that think this is too much. I think they need to get really familiar considering [01:07:00] what losing looks like. Look at Ukraine. You like that? Because right now, winning or losing is going to be decided by air power, space power, and we got to get real about fixing them, getting them healthy again.

We owe it not just to Airmen and Guardians, but to the country as a whole. A lot rides on it. So thanks, everybody.

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** You bet. Thanks, Doug. I'll just remind folks, the only thing more expensive than a first rate Air Force is a second rate Air Force.

**Doug Birkey:** Thanks, Doug.

**Lt. Gen. David Deptula, USAF (Ret.):** Thanks, Doug.

**John "JV" Venable:** Great to be with you, Doug.

**Doug Birkey:** And with that, I'd like to extend a big thank you to our guests for joining in today's discussion.

I'd also like to extend a thank you to our listeners for your continued support and for tuning into today's show. And if you like what you've heard today, don't forget to hit that like button and follow or subscribe to Airspace Advantage. You can also leave a comment to let us know what you think about our show or areas that you think we should explore further.

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