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Review of "Winning Armageddon: Curtis LeMay and Strategic Air Command, 1948-1957" by Trevor Albertson

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Trevor Albertson. *Winning Armageddon: Curtis LeMay and Strategic Air Command, 1948-1957*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019. Pp. 270.

In Stanley Kubrick's darkly comedic 1964 satire of the (il)logic of nuclear deterrence, *Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, two United States Air Force (USAF) generals are prominent characters: General Jack Ripper and General Buck Turgidson, played with scenery-chewing perfection by Sterling Hayden and George C. Scott respectively. Ripper has gone mad and sent his Strategic Air Command (SAC) bomber wing to nuke "the Russkies." Turgidson, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, wants to avoid going MAD (i.e., Mutually Assured Destruction) but sees a silver lining in the impending radioactive cloud. He informs the President: "if [prior to the Soviets realizing they are under attack] ... we have done nothing to suppress their retaliatory capabilities, we will suffer virtual annihilation ... if, on the other hand, we were to immediately launch an all-out and co-ordinated attack on all their airfields and missile bases, we'd stand a damn good chance of catching them with their pants down."¹ Turgidson is arguing for a preemptive first strike to eliminate the Soviet Union's ability to attack the US, once and for all.

Both fictional generals are thought to be thinly veiled parodies of General Curtis LeMay, the formidable commander of SAC from 1948-1957 (and subsequently USAF Chief of Staff from 1961-1965).² But LeMay was no madman. An efficient planner/organiser with a sharp strategic mind, LeMay played a pivotal role in the conduct of the strategic bombing campaigns against Germany and Japan—firebombing Tokyo to ruins in the process—which made a decisive contribution to Allied victory in the Second World War.³ In the early years of the Cold War, LeMay believed nuclear war was a real prospect and he was bound and determined to prepare SAC to prevail in one should deterrence fail.

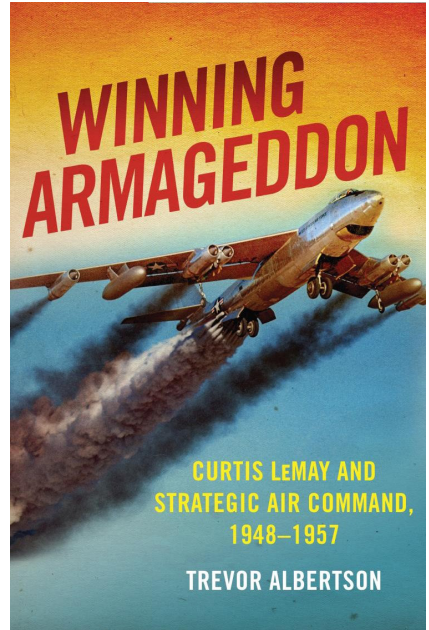
¹ See Peter Krämer, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (London: The British Film Institute, 2014). 50.

² There is some evidence that General Thomas Power, LeMay's deputy commander and his successor in command of SAC from 1957-64, was in fact Kubrick's role model.

³ For a recent take on LeMay and his role during the Second World War, see Malcolm Gladwell, *The Bomber Mafia: A Dream, A Temptation, and the Longest Night of the Second World War* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2021), based on the podcast of the same name. For a short biographical assessment see also Barrett Tillman, *Lemay* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

In his clear, concise and meticulously researched book examining this period in his career, Trevor Albertson demonstrates that LeMay, believing that “in an atomic conflict the force which plans to strike second may never strike at all” (p. 177), was similarly and firmly committed to the idea of preemption. LeMay argued publicly and privately—but carefully—that it was a winning strategy for waging nuclear war and protecting the US from devastation and defeat. “Rather than arguing for preventative war,” Albertson writes, “LeMay maintained support for preemptive strikes in response to an imminent Soviet threat against the United States” (p. xvii).⁴

Albertson’s book is divided into five chapters which proceed chronologically, outlining in parallel LeMay’s unswerving efforts to build and expand SAC alongside his consistent argument for a force capable of destroying the Soviet Union’s capacity to attack the US upon any sign of aggression. In LeMay’s rational calculation, ideally this point in time would occur prior to Soviet bombers taking off, “destroying his striking power at its source rather than its destination” (p. 143) thereby “destroy[ing] the war potential of an enemy to the point where he no longer retains the will or the capability to continue military operations” (p. 126). But when LeMay assumed command, SAC was not equal to this task as there were organisational problems in every operational area: strategic and tactical doctrine; command headquarters and force structure; technological capability of intercontinental bombers; basing of bomber wings (and related reconnaissance and tanker aircraft) both overseas (where they were vulnerable to attack) and in the continental



⁴ The Naval Institute Press, ironically, has released the best recent work on SAC through its History of Military Aviation Series, publishing several titles based on the PhD dissertations of former USAF officers. See Russell Isinger, “Review of Melvin J. Deaile, *Always at War: Organizational Culture in Strategic Air Command, 1946-1962*,” *Canadian Military History* 28, 2 (2019): 33-36, and Brent D. Ziarnick, *To Rule the Skies: General Thomas S. Power and the Rise of Strategic Air Command in the Cold War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2021).

US (preferred, as they were safer due to distance and air defences); training and basic accommodation of personnel; and the time-consuming release from custody of nuclear bombs from the civilian Atomic Energy Commission to SAC when the klaxon sounded scramble. Albertson cogently explains how LeMay overcame all these deficiencies by the end of his tenure, and in the process transformed SAC into the premier US military command—the sword and shield of national security.⁵

But a tension existed between the declared US policy of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations—of deterrence, the prevention of attack by credibly threatening nation-busting massive retaliation in response to it—and LeMay’s single-minded focus on a strategy of preemption should deterrence fail and an attack be in the offing, and it revolved around the critical issue of the timing.⁶ LeMay was well aware that a war plan that envisaged striking before an anticipated strike was difficult to reconcile with an official policy that assumed an undeniable attack as the prerequisite to a response. Perhaps more so, he recognised preemption ran against the deeply held ideal that the US would never deliver the first blow in a fight (memories of the dastardly Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor were strong in the US). LeMay’s statements were, therefore, often deliberately vague on the exact moment when SAC would strike, noting only that, “The attacks would be designed to cause serious damage to enemy offensive air capability and to destroy vital elements of his war-making capacity” (p. 113). Through impressive primary research, Albertson reveals that LeMay walked a fine line, consistent in his advocacy without ever using the word “preemption,” cognisant to steer clear of the perception that the military was challenging political policy. Though he was less guarded in classified settings and written briefings than in public speeches and writings, LeMay’s words were always chosen with precision, and in so doing he protected SAC and the mission he had assigned it by avoiding any controversy.

In his conclusion, Albertson asserts that “LeMay was clear: he believed in preemption as the best possible solution to the problem of

⁵ For more on the birth of SAC, see Walton S. Moody, *Building a Strategic Air Force* (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1996); and Phillip S. Meilinger, *Bomber: The Formation and Early Years of Strategic Air Command* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Air University Press, 2012).

⁶ On war planning and strategy during this period, see Edward Kaplan, *To Kill Nations: American Strategy in the Air-Atomic Age and the Rise of Mutually Assured Destruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

nuclear war that could result in the destruction of US cities and the deaths of many of its citizens—the same outcomes he had produced in Japan during World War II. LeMay was neither angel nor demon; he was a pragmatist that saw an opening. If that meant he had to drop the first bombs in a nuclear war to protect his country—at least in his estimation—then so be it” (p. 225). But could LeMay’s strategy have achieved its desired goal had “the balloon gone up?” Albertson is silent on its prospects for success, allowing only that such speculation is counterfactual. Soviet intelligence services were undoubtedly aware of LeMay’s public pronouncements, but neither does Albertson discuss any real or potential countermoves to threat of preemption. Logically, such a plan was a recipe for a spiral of escalation in any crisis if Soviets believed the threat to be credible—if your adversary’s strategy is preemption, then the temptation would always be to use your forces before you lose them. A Soviet “launch on warning” strategy would have diminished any likelihood of SAC blunting an attack to any significant degree.

But for those seeking a “what if” answer, historian Robert O’Connell posited a chilling counterfactual where, at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, SAC is unleashed in response to a Soviet misstep that results in a limited nuclear strike on the US. The end of this “Two Day’s War” sees the Soviet Union virtually annihilated, with 95 per cent of its population dead or dying. The rest of the world suffers millions of casualties from fallout and is horrified at the overkill. LeMay’s plan to overwhelm Soviet offensive capabilities works as advertised and the US emerges relatively unscathed with 250,000 dead, but it is now an international pariah, isolated and universally condemned.⁷ Albertson concedes this might indeed have been the result had the Cold War turned hot, noting that, had the US struck first with such a force at its disposal, it would have “sacrificed the use of its most cherished values as key weapons in the ongoing battle with the Soviets in winning the struggle for public support and opinion. To do so probably would have been fatal to the larger US cause” (p. 227). Fortunately for us all, deterrence kept the nuclear genie in the bottle during the most perilous moments of the Cold War.

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⁷ Robert L. O’Connell, “The Cuban Missile Crisis: Second Holocaust,” in *What Ifs? Of American History*, ed. Robert Cowley (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 2003), 251-72.