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A former Secretary of the Air Force looks back 50 years to how the force began and grew.

AFTER World War II, we specialized in inexperience,” said Eugene M. Zuckert of the period when the United States Air Force was coming into existence, making the transition from being part of the Army to independent status. “We’d never done our own budget. If we had a handful of people who had testified before Congress, I’d be surprised. There was no sophistication, no understanding of what being a coequal [branch] with the Navy and Army would impose upon us.”

Zuckert, now a lawyer in Washington, D.C., was one of the new service’s first senior civilian leaders. He recalled those days in a wide-ranging interview with *Air Force Magazine*, noting the many struggles USAF faced during his years as an assistant secretary and later when he became Secretary of the Air Force. He commented as well on the men who shaped the force, interservice rivalries faced, and the beginning of what was to become America’s most controversial war.

Zuckert’s association with the air arm actually began several years before it became independent. After earning degrees from Yale and a certificate from a combined law–business course at Harvard and Yale, he became an instructor in government and business at Harvard Business School. In the early 1940s, the commander of Army Air Forces, Gen. H.H. Arnold, recruited him to develop statistical controls. In that role, Zuckert instructed more

Zuckert Remembers

By Bruce D. Callander

than 3,000 AAF officers at Harvard and visited AAF bases throughout the United States.

Enter the Mentor

Still in his early 30s, however, Zuckert was eager to be in the military service himself. However, he joined not the AAF but the Navy with the help of fellow Yale alumnus Stuart Symington, who had rebuilt the sagging St. Louis-based Emerson Electric Manufacturing Co. into a major American arms contractor. In his later years, Symington would become Zuckert's mentor.

"I first met him [Symington] in 1943, when I was teaching in Harvard Business School," Zuckert said. "He offered me a job with Emerson Electric, which I couldn't take because it was war and I was teaching Air Force people. Then, I had wanted to get into service, and he helped me get into the Navy in the last year of the war."

Zuckert worked briefly in the Navy's inventory control program at the Pentagon and, when the war ended, became executive assistant to Symington, whom President Harry S. Truman had appointed head of the Surplus Property Administration. "Surplus property was a hopeless problem," Zuckert said. "So much of it was in terrible shape. As a discerning friend of mine said, it would have been a lot cheaper, a lot easier, and a lot better if they had just taken everything and dumped it in the ocean."

In January 1946, however, Truman named Symington assistant secretary of war for air and Zuckert became his special assistant. The following year, when the Air Force became a separate service, Symington was named its first secretary, and on Sept. 26, 1947, Zuckert became the new service's assistant secretary for management.

"I went from lieutenant (j.g.) in the Navy to assistant secretary in the Air Force in two years," Zuckert noted. "It was the fastest promotion in the history of the government, I think."

At 35, Zuckert found himself present at the creation not only of a new service but at a historic reorganization of the services. Both concepts were repugnant to many in some military quarters. This was particularly true in the case of the Navy's outspoken secretary, James V. Forrestal.

Forrestal also had an Ivy League

background. He was president of an investment firm when President Franklin D. Roosevelt brought him into government as a White House administrative assistant, later making him secretary of the wartime Navy. He now feared that his service would suffer with the creation of a separate Air Force and be outnumbered by USAF and the Army under unification.

Forrestal also opposed the creation of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, but surprisingly, he accepted the position himself when Truman offered it. Zuckert agreed that it was an ironic turn, but he added, "You have to remember that Forrestal was a very complicated guy and he could see everybody's point of view. I think that was finally what killed him. [Forrestal committed suicide in 1949.] He had such great pride in the traditional Navy, and it was very hard for him to be for something that would denigrate that in many ways."

Clash of Styles

Forrestal was now the civilian leader of the military establishment, but he did not seize the powers as his successors would. "He saw himself more as a coordinator and mediator than as having the line authority that people like Symington wanted in a defense secretary," said Zuckert. "Symington was a manager and he thought of things in hierarchical management terms. Of course, most of the time he was right. He thought the fellow either ought to have the authority or he shouldn't accept the job."

Nonetheless Forrestal continued to oppose the Air Force on a number of issues, and on the Air Force side, Symington fought to give his service an identity and a standing equal to that of the other services.

"Symington was a man of objectives," Zuckert explained. "He would get an objective and pursue it relentlessly. One of the great things about that time period was that both he and Spaatz [Gen. Carl A. "Tooe" Spaatz, the first Chief of Staff of the Air Force] realized that the Air Force, being a separate department, would have responsibilities and obligations of which they had no comprehension."

Zuckert's main role at the time was to help put the service on a sound financial footing. He represented USAF

in formulation of the Fiscal 1950 Joint budget, the first of its kind in history. He also developed new approaches to reporting and control. His new system divided appropriations into 12 major functional elements.

"I helped develop the fiscal control system that later became mandatory for the three services," according to Zuckert. "I partnered with Ed Rawlings [Lt. Gen. Edwin W. Rawlings, air comptroller] on that. I also had things like the base structure and installations where we were closing bases all the time after World War II. And I got involved with the integration program, which came as the result of Truman's order in 1948."

Racial desegregation of the services preceded the Civil Rights Act by more than a decade and was a potentially volatile move politically, but Zuckert said that Symington's approach to integration headed off more serious problems.

Zuckert said, "He went up to the Hill and met with Carl Vinson [the powerful lawmaker from Georgia who served as chairman of the House Armed Services Committee] and said, 'You know, we have this order from the President and we are going to obey it.' Vinson was no great fan of integration, but he said, 'As long as you aren't too noisy about it, that will be fine.' So we got quiet support from him."

Another of Zuckert's duties was to represent the Air Force on the committee that developed the Uniform Code of Military Justice. "That was one of those jobs where you are appointed from the service," he said. "There was a member from the Army and Navy. And they had a wonderful professor from Harvard, who was the outstanding authority on evidence, and he was the spearhead who rewrote the code. There was no great feeling in the Air Force as there was in the Army and Navy about changing the code. So I kind of went along with him and we got the thing through, and it was climaxed by a meeting with Forrestal at which he resolved the differences between the services. It was sad because it was in the closing days of Forrestal's term, and it was almost as though he was flipping coins when he made the decisions."

Zuckert maintains the UCMJ has

worked. "I think, considering the fact that it's been more than 50 years, it's done pretty well," he said. "Most important is the way it's administered. That is what will determine whether it is giving justice."

On the whole, Zuckert said, the unification of the services also went remarkably well. "It was very hard for the people at the working level to adjust to a new relationship," he said, "but on the other hand, it did work surprisingly well. ... Symington cut through the difficulties so well. ... It was a lot of work, but he had it so well thought out in his mind that we had few problems."

In 1949, two major events changed the Pentagon hierarchy. Congress amended the National Security Act to increase the power of the Secretary of Defense and further subordinate the role of civilian heads of the services. That same year, Forrestal suffered a nervous breakdown, resigned his Pentagon post, and committed suicide. He was replaced by Louis A. Johnson.

"An Absolute Disaster"

A lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserve, a former commander of the American Legion, and former assistant secretary of war from 1937–40, Johnson had Presidential ambitions and sought to further them by slashing defense spending, a popular position at the time. Truman also had advocated cuts but changed his position when war broke out in Korea. Johnson did not.

"An absolute disaster," Zuckert said of Johnson's approach. "He had no conception of what the job was. He was still trying to cut the budget ... when we went into the war in June 1950. He didn't know how to use the machinery. He was so bad that people wouldn't believe it if you told them."

To protest Johnson's tactics, Symington resigned his secretaryship. Zuckert was appointed to the Atomic Energy Commission in 1952 and served until 1954 when he returned to private law practice.

Eight years later, John F. Kennedy became President and named Robert S. McNamara to be Secretary of Defense. McNamara was well-acquainted with Zuckert, having met him in the early 1940s when both were young faculty members at Harvard. McNamara recom-

mended Zuckert to become Secretary of the Air Force.

McNamara filled many defense positions with young intellectuals who became known as the "Whiz Kids." Did Zuckert, who was 50 at the time of his appointment, consider himself to have been in that category? "No," he said, "I'm not that bright. I'm more of a utility infielder."

The Pentagon to which Zuckert now returned was different from the one he had left. McNamara used the powers of his position to the fullest. "McNamara recognized if he was going to run the show, he would have to have the authority," said Zuckert, "and he had no trouble with getting the authority. He also was a tremendous person. We could argue about him, but he had a sense of organization and how to get things done, the like of which I have never seen, even in Symington.

"Between then [McNamara's appointment by the President-elect] and Jan. 20 when he took office, he laid

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out his program of action for the first four years," Zuckert recalled. "And he accomplished most of it."

McNamara's "Big Problem"

The fact that McNamara and Zuckert were close friends, however, did not guarantee that they would agree on all matters. In fact, Zuckert says that he always has felt that McNamara viewed the Air Force as "his big problem" during his time at the Pentagon. "We were very popular with the Congress," said the former Air Force Secretary. "We were able to precipitate things like the B-70 fight. So, we were really the opposition, and he never missed an opportunity to put us down."

Early in his term, the services learned how effectively McNamara could get things done. The Air Force was considering a new swing-wing fighter-bomber known as the TFX. The Navy also was looking for a new fleet defense aircraft with a similarly wide range of speeds. When a study group recommended both develop the TFX, McNamara quickly embraced the idea, despite objections from both services.

"It's the kind of idea that would appeal to him," Zuckert said. "He would think it was ridiculous to have two separate planes. He would feel that people of goodwill on both sides could compromise their objectives." McNamara would have thought this could be done, said Zuckert, "without tossing the baby out with the bathwater."

The Air Force's TFX finally emerged as a fine aircraft, the F-111, but the Navy version foundered and died when it was found to be unsuitable for carrier duty. The Navy then concentrated on the F-14 Tomcat. "There were physical limitations [to the Navy TFX]," Zuckert conceded, "but as one of the wisest people I know in Washington once said, 'If the Navy had wanted the F-111 to work, it would have worked.'"

Soon after he became Secretary, Zuckert faced a problem within his own service, that of choosing a new Chief of Staff. "I will tell you what my situation was," he said. "We had had all these great men in World War II, and then we developed what every organization goes through, and that's 'second generationism.' You don't automatically have a Hap Arnold in an organization as it begins to mature.

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“So I was faced with the problem of, Who have I got? Tommy White [Gen. Thomas D. White, the incumbent Chief of Staff] was beloved and that helped him a lot, but I sensed in 1961 that he was a tired man. I didn’t even think he was well. It turned out that my intuition was pretty good.” [White died not long after leaving office.]

The Big-Leaguers

“So I felt the Air Force had to move on, and I looked over the field and there were two big-leaguers. One was LeMay [Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, a World War II hero and former commander of Strategic Air Command], and one was Schriever [Gen. Bernard A. Schriever, commander of Air Research and Development Command, later Air Force Systems Command]. But Schriever did not have the support of the combat side of the Air Force, and my feeling was that there was only a choice of one, which is not the happiest thing.”

Zuckert went on, “On the other hand, I felt LeMay was outstanding, that the Air Force would rally around him, and that was the way to go, even though it might make my life a lot more difficult.”

Did the appointment of LeMay make life difficult for him?

“Yes,” Zuckert conceded, “but we had a great relationship, considering the number of problems we had. LeMay did not think I was a great man, and I probably wasn’t a great man, but we worked it out.”

A major point of contention—not just within the Air Force but throughout the Pentagon—was the growing American involvement in Vietnam. In this as in other areas, Zuckert found himself differing with his boss, the Secretary of Defense.

“He [McNamara] was what I would call a gradualist,” said Zuckert. “Every time I went up and tried to get some escalation of the kind of force we would use, his instant reaction was to shoot it down. ... It was so ridiculous to try to fight a war with one hand tied behind your back and the kind of equipment you had to use. Nobody’s going to win a war when the targets are planned at the White House at noon on Wednesdays.”

Zuckert added, “I have always felt that Ho Chi Minh [Hanoi’s Communist leader] knew he was going to win when we didn’t bring the equivalent of brute force to this thing and try to end it. It may not have worked, but he was assured of victory as long as we weren’t going all out. ... It was a case of, ‘Hang your clothes on a hickory limb, but don’t go near the water.’ That’s oversimplified, but I’m not a deep thinker.”

If he was frustrated by the limited-war policies in Vietnam, Zuckert found satisfaction in the progress the Air Force made in other areas such as its space program.

“I was very close to General Schriever,” he said, “and though I had to rein him in when we got into problems with NASA, I was very supportive of him.”

“In fact, my greatest accomplishment as Secretary of the Air Force was setting up [Project] Forecast, the study of the

technology that was coming up and how it should influence Air Force thinking. ... I put him in charge of it, and he got a big team and they really did a job in trying to see what was coming up technologically that should affect the way the Air Force thought about fighting a war.”

Did he agree with the decision to keep the military and civilian space programs separate?

“That was a given as far as I was concerned,” Zuckert maintained. “In fact, Jim Webb [director of NASA] talked to me about it, and I assured him he wasn’t going to have trouble with Schriever and he had a minimum of trouble.”

Asked what he felt he did best as Secretary, Zuckert said, “I hung in there. I blunted the effect of McNamara on the Air Force as much as I could. And I fought for some things ... like the escalation of our airlift capabilities. I was for some good things and worked for them.”

“If I had to do it over again, boy, it would be a different ball game. For one thing, I would have my own program. I was mostly dealing with trying to help the Air Force with the Air Force program and opposing McNamara. I should have had a four- or five-point program of my own as to what I wanted to get done.”

“For example, I would have waged a much more vigorous battle to change the Air Force procurement of technical items. I would have done more of what they have done since. My assistant secretaries and I really didn’t make enough impact on the Air Force procurement program. I don’t feel it was as efficient as it should have been—nowhere near as efficient.”

What would he like to see the Air Force be 50 years from now? “There may not be an Air Force 50 years from now,” he said. “I’m not bright enough or ever have been bright enough to know where the technology is going. I just hope that whatever we have is technologically superior to anything else around.” ■

Bruce D. Callander, a regular contributor to Air Force Magazine, served tours of active duty during World War II and the Korean War. In 1952, he joined Air Force Times, serving as editor from 1972 to 1986. His most recent story for Air Force Magazine, “Dissecting the Tempo Problem,” appeared in the April 1998 issue.