

Keeper File

LeMay and the “Airpower Battle”

It was midway through the Eisenhower era, and Strategic Air Command was entering its second decade. Late 1956 was the moment chosen by Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, the famed SAC commander, to spell out his concept of SAC's purpose in life. He did so in a 2,700-word statement for a House committee, which published it along with other papers. The statement makes clear LeMay had a vision of SAC being so obviously powerful that it would be perceived by any and all enemies to be unbeatable and so deter them from any aggressive action. He described what he called “the airpower battle” as something new—global in scope, dependent totally on forces in being, and more important than any struggle on land or at sea. LeMay led SAC from 1948 through 1957, the longest tenure of any US military commander in nearly a century. When he left, SAC had grown to a force of 224,000 airmen, nearly 2,000 heavy bombers, and some 800 tankers.

In previous history, wars were generally protracted and long-range undertakings. Nations and their leaders recognized this from the outset. The decision for victory or defeat was the culmination of a long series of actions and reactions, spread out in time. ... “Protracted war” passed with the advent of the nuclear age. If we are to be successful in preventing war today, we must recognize the radically changed dimension in today's warfare—the dimension of time. Today, decisive force is already in existence, compressed in nuclear weapons stockpiles. It can be applied across the length and breadth of an enemy nation in a few hours, or in a few days at the most, by long-range jet bombers. ...

Our only significant strength is our strength in being. Our military strength is produced by our people and by our industry. It reposes in our various services. But every military man, soldier, sailor, or airman, agrees on one thing. As long as there are airplanes and air weapons, the successful conduct of any military operation hinges upon the possession of air superiority. Strength on the ground or on the sea can only prevail, or for that matter survive, if the air above it is friendly. I think we all agree that we can neither engage nor win unless we have air superiority.

Our first job therefore is to win the airpower battle. The airpower battle is a global battle. It is not a localized battle, and it cannot be won locally. Airpower, especially strategic airpower, is flexible. It can strike at long range or at short range; it can strike at a single target from many base areas, or at many targets from a single-base area. It can take off from widely dispersed bases and mass over a target system 5,000 miles distant. ... When I speak of air strength I am not speaking only of airplanes. I am speaking of airfields, fuel supplies, depots, stockpiles of aircraft parts, weapons and weapons stockpiles, control and communications centers, highly trained and skilled manpower—and airplanes. These constitute airpower. These are the things which must be destroyed if the airpower battle is to be won. The airpower battle is a battle we cannot lose, because its loss is defeat. Like any battle, the airpower battle is part of war. It is the decisive battle in modern war—the initial battle and the one whose outcome will clearly determine who wins. The decisive phase of the airpower battle is won or lost before the shooting war starts. This brings us again to the conclusion that the Cold War in which the United States is now

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engaged could already be a part of World War III. And I repeat, the result of the struggle for airpower supremacy will determine who wins and who loses. More importantly, as long as we win the airpower battle during peacetime, we will be successful in deterring war and preserving peace. ...

Our national policy is one of deterrence. Our national leaders recently made some very clear statements about that policy. We must deter aggression. We deter by making it clear that we have strength, and that its application will cost the enemy more than he could possibly gain by attacking us. Our assumption is, of course, that those who make decisions in the Soviet bloc are not without reason—that they are not deliberately bent upon suicide. If they are reasonable men, and we have cause to believe that they are not only reasonable, but practical, they will not start a shooting war when there is any serious doubt that they can win it. They will not start a shooting war, regardless of their definition of victory, as long as it is clear to them that no matter how they go about it, it will cost them more than they can possibly gain.

Assuming the Soviets are guided by reason, even by selfish reason, they will not initiate [any move to a phase] during which strength is overtly applied. ... The reason is obvious—they have not won the struggle for airpower ascendancy. We have the strength to deter them. Today, we have the ability to win the airpower battle. So today, we are achieving our national aim—we are preventing shooting war by possessing enough superiority that we are clearly ahead in the current Cold War.

The important thing to remember is that if we do, in fact, possess the power to deter, it is only because we clearly possess the strength to win—the strength to win the airpower battle and, through it, the war. ■