

# Counterforce, LeMay Style

*As graduation speakers go, Gen. Curtis E. LeMay was hard to top. Famed World War II commander, youngest general since Ulysses S. Grant, architect of Strategic Air Command, he was in his third year as Chief of Staff. LeMay had clashed bitterly with Kennedy and Johnson Administration officials on many occasions. He didn't hide his animosity. He told the 493 cadets he didn't want nuclear stalemate, preferring US nuclear superiority. Arms control threatened US superiority. Nuclear war was not inevitable; nuclear weapons made war far less likely. The US needed "counterforce"—the ability to destroy Soviet nuclear weapons in a disarming strike. Each one of these views was anathema to the wizards of Washington.*

**T**hrough development of nuclear energy and advanced aerospace systems, civilization has attained its greatest capacity for progress or for destruction. From many sources, we hear expressions of doubt concerning man's ability to avoid using this power for his destruction.

I do not share that doubt. It seems to me that modern weapons make it clear that the penalties for lapses in vigilance and misuse of power that have marred history are now prohibitive. This means that civilization, in order to survive and progress, must do better than it has in the past. And it is my conviction that, in recent years, civilization has done better, according to standards that are acceptable to our country and to the Free World.

It is also my conviction that the United States Air Force throughout its history has done much to make that improvement possible. My basis for that conviction is the record of Air Force operations through two world wars, the Korean War, and through a long roll of crises such as Lebanon, Formosa, Berlin, and Cuba.

For about the first half of that period, the Air Force was planning, testing, training, and fighting to produce the results that established it by 1945 as a dominant military instrument of national policy. Since that time, we have provided the major strategic deterrent to general war. In that role, we have convinced the potential enemy that the risks incurred by full-scale aggression are unacceptable. ...

It is vital to understand that these restraints have not resulted from a sudden and miraculous transformation in the attitude and the aims of world Communism. It is equally important to understand that these restraints have been imposed primarily by the superiority of US strategic forces, teamed with hard-hitting tactical elements. ...

Your first requirement will be to obtain continuing support for the maintenance of US strategic advantage. That advantage must be maintained as the cornerstone of our deterrent posture. ...

You therefore must not permit the requirement for strategic advantage to be obscured by arguments that describe the

## "Address to Cadets"

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present world situation as a condition of "mutual stalemate" and "mutual deterrence."

There is no evidence of stalemate in the present power balance. It still favors us by a clear margin. It is still determined by relative pace of actions going forward in all the areas of national endeavor—social, economic, and military. ...

The idea of using force to achieve total defeat of an enemy is now only one of the available choices. When you consider the damage levels that high intensity war can bring even to the nominal "winner," total defeat of the enemy may be the least desirable choice.

For the future we need to improve our methods of using weapons to gain precise, but limited, objectives for particular crisis situations. This would increase our capability to neutralize selected targets which are important to the enemy. If carefully applied, these actions could force him to back down from his initial aggression and negotiate our respective interest. ...

Now, as a final comment on strategy and operational concepts, I want to stress the importance of a counterforce concept of deterrence. By "counterforce," I mean the ability to destroy selective elements of the aggressor's strategic offensive systems, thereby reducing his capability to attack us.

I believe counterforce provides the best deterrent because it is based on a concept of destroying or neutralizing the military forces, which the enemy must depend on to gain a victory. And through this effective deterrence we achieve the principal objective of our military forces—that is, the full protection of American lives and property.

If deterrence should fail, counterforce provides for maximum limitation of damage under the worst possible conditions. Thus, counterforce, in situations involving either the success or failure of deterrence, provides the greatest dividend that we can gain from any strategy. ...

In my 35 years of service, I have seen aerospace power remold or set aside many traditional military concepts. Since 1945, it has compelled action on a broad and continuing basis to meet the hard requirements of our security as determined at the highest levels of national leadership. That action, though discomfiting to some, is essential to all. ★