

Here are the key events of a world conflict that shaped, and was shaped by, the Air Force.

The Air Force and the Cold War: A Chronology, 1945-91

By John T. Correll



Allied aircraft hauled food, fuel, and other necessities during the 15-month-long Berlin Airlift, until the blockade ended. Here, USAF C-54s deliver coal. Even the coal dust from the unloading operation was saved—swept into piles for the Berliners to take away and use.

The independent US Air Force and the Cold War both began in the 1940s. Over the next 40 years, they had a strong influence on each other. The Air Force was shaped by Cold War requirements. Cold War strategy evolved in considerable part on the basis of what airpower made possible.

Various dates are given for the beginning and end of the Cold War. By some accounts, it started in 1939, when the Soviet Union annexed the Baltic states. NATO, in its "London Declaration," proclaimed the Cold War over in July 1990, but nobody paid any attention. For its part, the Department of Defense awards its Cold War recognition certificate to veterans who served between Sept. 2, 1945 (the date of the Japanese surrender that formally ended World War II), through Dec. 26, 1991 (when the Soviet Union ceased to exist).

The atomic bomb was central to military power in the Cold War. It was essentially an air weapon, and the Air Force, the newest of the military services, was thrust into a position as the nation's first line of defense. Later on, strategic nuclear deterrence was vested in a triad of forces:

Air Force bombers, Air Force ICBMs, and Navy submarine launched ballistic missiles.

In addition to the balance of strategic nuclear power, the Cold War also encompassed other situations and events, including the Berlin Airlift, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and two regional wars—in Korea and Vietnam—that occurred in the shadow of the US-Soviet nuclear confrontation. The closest the Cold War came to having a front line was in Europe, where NATO was squared off against an in-place force of 132 Soviet-Warsaw Pact divisions, 32,000 tanks, and about 6,000 combat aircraft.

The Soviet Union was a mighty force, but it was spending up to 30 percent of its gross national product for military purposes and it held its allies only by force of arms. The Warsaw Pact collapsed in July 1991 and the Soviet Union's own demise was not far behind.

US veterans who took part in the long struggle—airmen from all specialties and members of the other services as well—are fond of saying, "The Cold War is over, and we won it." And so they did. They held Soviet power in check until it collapsed of decay and its own dead weight. ■



1945-49: Challenge and Containment

May 8, 1945. Nazi Germany surrenders. Soviet Red Army holds Eastern Europe, Balkans, and eastern Germany.

March 5, 1946. Churchill says an “Iron Curtain” has descended in Europe.

March 12, 1947. “Truman Doctrine” declares US support for Greece and Turkey to fight communist insurgency.

June 5, 1947. Marshall Plan for recovery of Europe announced.

July 1947. “Containment” concept elaborated by George Kennan in *Foreign Affairs* “X” article.

Sept. 18, 1947. The US Air Force becomes a separate service.

1947-48. Soviet Union converts East European nations into subservient communist states.

June 26, 1948. Berlin Airlift begins; it ends on Sept. 30, 1949.

June 26, 1948. Air Force receives first operational B-36 bombers.

Feb. 26-March 2, 1949. B-50 *Lucky Lady II* makes first nonstop flight around the world.

April 4, 1949. North Atlantic Treaty Organization created.

May 23, 1949. Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) established.

Aug. 29, 1949. The Soviet Union explodes its first atomic bomb.

Oct. 1, 1949. Mao Zedong takes power, establishing the People’s Republic of China.

Oct. 7, 1949. Communist-ruled German Democratic Republic (East Germany) established.



Staff map by Zaur Eylanbekov

In 1948, when the Soviets blockaded the ground routes into Berlin, three air corridors, each 20 miles wide, remained open. The flags indicate the American, British, French, and Soviet occupied sectors.

1950s: At the Brink

Jan. 31, 1950. Truman orders development of the hydrogen bomb.

Feb. 14, 1950. Soviet Union and China sign treaty of alliance and mutual assistance.



The US responded quickly to the invasion of South Korea in 1950, believing it was the beginning of a global communist offensive. USAF F-86 Sabres performed with special distinction.

March 15, 1950. Joint Chiefs of Staff give the Air Force formal responsibility for development of strategic guided missiles.

April 14, 1950. NSC-68, “blueprint for the Cold War,” prescribes US rearmament and containment of Soviet expansionism.

June 25, 1950. Korean War begins with communist invasion of South Korea.

Oct. 25, 1950. Red Chinese forces enter the Korean War.

Jan. 1, 1951. Air Defense Command, previously abolished, is restored to full status as a major air command.

July 14, 1952. The Ground Observer Corps begins its round-the-clock skywatch.

Oct. 3, 1952. Britain tests its first atomic bomb.

Oct. 31, 1952. The United States tests its first thermonuclear device.

Dec. 9, 1952. NATO adopts strategy 14/1, which bases the defense of Europe on use of US nuclear weapons.

June 5, 1953. B-47 bomber achieves initial operational capability.

July 27, 1953. UN and North Korea sign armistice agreement, producing cease-fire in Korea.

Aug. 12, 1953. Soviet Union explodes a thermonuclear device.

Oct. 30, 1953. NSC 162-2 inaugurates the “New Look” strategy.

1950s: At the Brink (cont.)

Jan. 12, 1954. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles makes “massive retaliation” speech.

April 7, 1954. Eisenhower formulates the “Domino Theory.”

May 1, 1955. Warsaw Pact created.

May 5, 1955. West Germany joins NATO.

June 19, 1955. B-52 bomber achieves initial operational capability.

July 21, 1955. Eisenhower proposes “Open Skies.” Soviet Union refuses.

Nov. 26, 1955. Pentagon gives Air Force operational control of ICBMs and all land-based missiles with range greater than 200 miles.

Jan. 17, 1956. DOD reveals the existence of SAGE, an electronic air defense system.

July 4, 1956. CIA U-2 reconnaissance aircraft makes first overflight of Soviet Union.

Oct. 23-Nov. 10, 1956. Hungarian Revolution crushed by Soviet troops.

Nov. 18, 1956. Khrushchev tells West, “We will bury you.”

May 23, 1957. NATO adopts strategy 14/2, “Massive Retaliation.”

June 11, 1957. SAC receives first Air Force U-2 reconnaissance aircraft.

June 28, 1957. SAC receives first KC-135 jet-powered tankers.

July 31, 1957. The Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line is reported to be fully operational.

Aug. 1, 1957. US and Canada form North American Air Defense Command.

Aug. 21, 1957. Soviet Union test-launches world’s first ICBM.

Oct. 4, 1957. Soviet Union puts Sputnik, the world’s first artificial satellite, into Earth orbit.

Dec. 6, 1957. The first US attempt to orbit a satellite fails when a Vanguard rocket loses thrust and explodes.

Dec. 17, 1957. First successful US launch and test flight of an ICBM, an Air Force Atlas.

Jan. 31, 1958. US finally places a satellite in orbit with Explorer I.

July 15, 1958. First major deployment (to Lebanon) of Composite Air Strike Force.

Sept. 9, 1959. Atlas missile declared operational by CinCSAC.



The B-52 became Strategic Air Command's iconic bomber.

1960s: Superpower Standoff

Feb. 3, 1960. France tests its first atomic bomb.

May 1, 1960. CIA U-2 reconnaissance aircraft is shot down over the Soviet Union.

July 20, 1960. First flight of Polaris, the first US submarine launched ballistic missile.

Aug. 10, 1960. First successful flight of Air Force/CIA Corona, the first US photoreconnaissance satellite.

Aug. 17, 1960. Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff created to coordinate targeting of Air Force ICBMs and Navy SLBMs.

Jan. 6, 1961. Khrushchev declares support for “wars of national liberation.”

Feb. 1, 1961. Ballistic Missile Early Warning System operational.

Feb. 3, 1961. SAC’s EC-135 Airborne Command Post “Looking Glass” begins operations.

April 12, 1961. Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin makes the first manned spaceflight.

April 17, 1961. CIA-supported Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba fails.

July 1961. Fifty percent of SAC’s bombers and tankers maintain 15-minute ground alert.

Aug. 13, 1961. Construction of Berlin Wall begins.

Sept. 6, 1961. National Reconnaissance Office created to operate intelligence satellites.

Oct. 26, 1961. US and Soviet tanks confront each other at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin.

Nov. 16, 1961. Air Force’s Operation Farm Gate commandos arrive in Vietnam.

June 16, 1962. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara publicly announces “No Cities/Counterforce” nuclear targeting doctrine.

1960s: Superpower Standoff (cont.)

Oct. 14, 1962. Air Force U-2 obtains photographic evidence of Soviet ballistic missile sites in Cuba.

Oct. 27, 1962. First 10 Air Force Minuteman ICBMs go on alert.

Oct. 28, 1962. USSR agrees to remove missiles from Cuba, ending Cuban Missile Crisis.

Aug. 5, 1963. Limited Test Ban Treaty signed by US, Great Britain, and Soviet Union.

Aug. 30, 1963. US and Soviet Union install round-the-clock teletype hotline between the Pentagon and the Kremlin.

April 21, 1964. The number of US ICBMs on alert pulls even with the number of bombers on alert.

Oct. 15, 1964. Khrushchev deposed, succeeded by Leonid Brezhnev.

Oct. 16, 1964. Chinese explode a nuclear device.

Dec. 22, 1964. First flight of the SR-71 Blackbird strategic reconnaissance aircraft.

Jan. 1, 1965. Air Force activates first SR-71 wing.

Feb. 18, 1965. McNamara announces change of strategy from “No Cities” to “Assured Destruction.”

March 2, 1965. Sustained air operations against North Vietnam begin.

May 1965. C-141A Starlifter, USAF’s first jet-powered transport, reaches initial operational capability.

March 10, 1966. France withdraws its armed forces from NATO.

Jan. 12, 1968. The Air Force announces a system for tactical units to carry with them everything they need to operate at “bare” bases equipped only with runways, taxiways, parking areas, and a water supply.

Jan. 16, 1968. NATO adopts strategy 14/3, “Flexible Response,” replacing Massive Retaliation.



After the Cuban Missile Crisis ended in 1962, President Kennedy met at the White House with the Air Force team responsible for discovering the missiles. Nearest the President is Gen. Curtis LeMay, Air Force Chief of Staff. Maj. Richard Heyser, the U-2 pilot who found the missiles, is next to LeMay. At left are Col. Ralph Steakley and Lt. Col. Joe O’Brady. Standing in the background is Brig. Gen. Godfrey McHugh, the President’s Air Force aide.

Aug. 20, 1968. Soviet and Warsaw Pact armed forces stamp out “Prague Spring” political liberalization movement in Czechoslovakia.

Nov. 12, 1968. Brezhnev Doctrine: Soviet satellites must conform to Soviet direction.

March 2-Aug. 13, 1969. Soviet and Chinese forces clash along border in Asia.

June 24, 1969. NSDM-16 calls for “Strategic Sufficiency.”

July 20, 1969. US astronauts make first lunar landing.

1970s: Detente in a Dangerous Decade

July 30, 1970. Israeli Air Force shoots down five MiGs flown by Soviet pilots in Middle East “War of Attrition.”



An F-4 lands at a base in South Vietnam under the watchful eyes of a security policeman and his dog. The theory was that if Vietnam fell to the communists, the other nations of Southeast Asia would also fall “like a row of dominoes.”

September 1970. C-5 airlifter achieves initial operational capability.

Dec. 16, 1970. SAC receives first FB-111s.

Dec. 30, 1970. First squadron of Minuteman III missiles (with multiple warheads) becomes operational.

Feb. 21-28, 1972. President Nixon visits China.

May 26, 1972. SALT I and ABM treaties signed.

Aug. 15, 1973. Air Force aircraft fly their last combat missions of Vietnam War.

Oct. 12-Nov. 14, 1973. US Nickel Grass airlift resupplies Israel in the Yom Kippur War.

March 4, 1974. Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger announces “Limited Nuclear Options” strategy.

April 30, 1975. Saigon falls to North Vietnamese forces.

June 30, 1977. President Carter cancels B-1 bomber program.

Dec. 16, 1978. US and China establish diplomatic relations. US transfers recognition from Taipei to Beijing.

June 18, 1979. SALT II treaty signed.

Dec. 27, 1979. Soviet forces invade Afghanistan and overthrow the government.

1980s: Confronting the Evil Empire

Jan. 3, 1980. Carter withdraws SALT II treaty from Senate consideration because of Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

March 31, 1980. Air Defense Command inactivated.

July 25, 1980. Presidential Directive 59 establishes “Countervailing” strategy.

Aug. 22, 1980. Department of Defense reveals existence of stealth technology.

June 18, 1981. First (and secret) flight of the F-117A stealth fighter.

Oct. 2, 1981. President Reagan reinstates the B-1 bomber program.

July 1, 1982. US Air Force activates first ground launched cruise missile (GLCM) wing at RAF Greenham Common in England.

Sept. 1, 1982. Air Force Space Command is established.

December 1982. Air launched cruise missile reaches initial operational capability.

Jan. 17, 1983. NSDD-75 calls for rollback of Soviet power and expansionism.

March 8, 1983. Reagan delivers “Evil Empire” speech.

March 23, 1983. Reagan delivers “Star Wars” speech.

Sept. 1, 1983. Soviet Union shoots down Korean Airlines flight 007.

Oct. 10, 1985. The Peacekeeper ICBM reaches initial operational capability.

April 15, 1986. In Operation El Dorado Canyon, US Air Force F-111s take off in England, refuel in air six times, strike targets in Libya, return to base in England.

October 1986. Reagan holds to Strategic Defense Initiative at Reykjavik summit.

Oct. 1, 1986. B-1B bomber achieves initial operational capability.

May 5, 1987. The last Titan II ICBM is taken off strategic alert.

June 12, 1987. Reagan delivers “Tear down this wall” speech in Berlin.

Dec. 8, 1987. US and USSR sign Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty.

Dec. 7, 1988. Gorbachev reverses Brezhnev Doctrine.

July 17, 1989. First flight of the B-2A bomber.

Nov. 10, 1989. Fall of the Berlin Wall.



A Titan II sits in its silo. The last of this second generation version of Air Force ICBMs was removed from alert in 1987.

1990-91: Fall of the Soviet Union

July 24, 1990. SAC ends more than 29 years of continuous Looking Glass airborne alert missions.

Aug. 2, 1990. Iraq invades Kuwait.

Oct. 3, 1990. East and West Germany reunify.

Nov. 17, 1990. Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty signed.

Jan. 17, 1991. Operation Desert Storm begins; ends with Iraqi surrender Feb. 28.

July 1, 1991. Warsaw Pact formally disbands.

July 31, 1991. US and USSR sign START agreement.

Aug. 19, 1991. Communist hardliners attempt coup in Moscow. It fails Aug. 21.

Sept. 27, 1991. US strategic bomber crews stand down from round-the-clock alert.

Dec. 26, 1991. The Soviet Union ceases to exist.



The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 was a visible symbol of the fall of the Soviet Union, which formally ceased to exist two years later.

AP photo by John Gaps III

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributing editor. His most recent article, “Airpower and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” appeared in the August issue.