

Note from AFA President -- Book Recommendation

AFA Members, Congressional Staffers, Civic Leaders, and DOCA members, this past weekend I read a great book – one that anyone who cares about airpower should consider. The book is entitled: LEMAY – The Life and Wars of General Curtis LeMay. It is written by Warren Kozak, published in 2009, and came to me via a staff member from a former Chairman of the Board of AFA. Simply put – the book destroyed all the preconceived notions I had about General LeMay – most of which were formed by his run for Vice President, the movie Dr. Strangelove, and his often quoted statement of "bombing the North Vietnamese back to the stone age."

Here is a sampling of what I found in the book:

"It should be remembered that generals Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant fought seventeen battles in each of their careers. LeMay fought one almost every day for three years. And unlike any other general in modern times, he did not send his men out on perilous missions, he led them. On the most dangerous missions, LeMay insisted on flying the lead aircraft in the formation himself, in the first plane the enemy would target. No other general in WWII did this."

The Army Air Corps chose the B-18 over the B-17 in the 1935 heavy bomber competition. The country was in the midst of the great depression and leaders were looking for the 75% solution [my words] when it came to recapitalizing the Army Air Corps. However, this compromised approach yielded an aircraft that lacked both the payload capacity and range to effectively engage in most combat scenarios—including those anticipated in Europe and the Pacific. Fortunately, Congress had the wisdom to add money for the B-17 – to keep both the bomber ... and the Boeing Company alive for what was to come. By the end of the war 12,000 B-17s had been constructed, with nearly half of these lost in combat.

"... the start of the military buildup in the fall of 1941 hardly relieved LeMay's anxiety. The US was starting from nothing. It was impossible, he thought to correct twenty years of neglect in just six months or even a year, and he was right."

"The entire American effort managed just over seventy sorties in August of 1942, compared to ... more than 20,000 [sorties] a month later in the war."

"He had no tolerance whatsoever for stupidity, incompetence, or laziness, and he was brutal when he witnessed these cardinal vices. ... his consistent refrain was: "whoever didn't cut it or didn't like it here could always go to the infantry."

"Undergirding all Japanese strategy was a dismissive view that Americans [were] products of liberalism and individualism and incapable of fighting a protracted war."

"In any given month in the first half of 1945, upwards of 250,000 Asians were dying at the hands of the Japanese – a quarter of a million lives every thirty days."

"All told, the Air Force dropped over 12,000 mines and brought Japan's shipping down to one-tenth of what it had been before the mining."

LeMay in a speech in 1945: "It is beyond my powers of description to picture to you the difference between the bomb-blackened ruins and the desolation of our enemy's cities and the peaceful Ohio cities and landscape, untouched and unmarred by war. I can only say to you, if you love America, do everything you can do to make sure that what happened to Germany and Japan will never happen to our country. Our preparedness for war should be the measure of our desire for peace. The last war was started by airpower and finished by [airpower]. America, if attacked must be able to take the initiative immediately. It must attack in turn."

LeMay (in 1965): "[The enemy asked for it and they got it.] In reverse fashion, if we keep listening to the gospel of apology and equivocation which all too many politicians and savants are preaching today in the US, we will be asking for the same thing. And in time may achieve it."

"'Whatever you do, somebody's going to criticize you. Forget criticism,' was the advice he gave to Air Force personnel."

A list of LeMay's accomplishments is staggering.

- He developed heavy bombing tactics in the European Theater of Operations ... replacing ineffective and haphazard methods with disciplined combat formations that maximized the bombers' ability to defend themselves against enemy fighters and increase bombing accuracy over the target.
- He developed the tactics that transformed B-29 operations in the Pacific from an utter failure into an overwhelming success by adopting unorthodox tactics and low altitude bombing runs.
- He created the RAND Corporation
- He started the ICBM program
- He was the Commander of the Air Force in Europe at the start of the Berlin Air Lift
- He built the Strategic Air Command into a force second to none

Despite his legendary differences with SECDEF McNamara (who earlier served under him as a Lt Col), the latter said about him: "Without question, Curtis LeMay was the finest combat commander the US has ever produced."

On balance, this book is important for many reasons. Gen LeMay stood up against group-think. He understood airpower and the human dimension of war. He stood by his principles, shunned popularity, argued for a strong deterrent. And ... he was right. We owe him a ton. The legacy of his efforts still grace our Air Force today in Minutemen missiles, B-52 bombers, and KC-135 tankers.

For your consideration,

Mike

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