



To Kill Nations: American Strategy in the Air-Atomic Age and the Rise of Mutually Assured Destruction by Edward Kaplan.

Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2015. Pp. viii, 260. ISBN 978-0-8014-5248-2.

Review by Gates Brown, US Army Command and General Staff College (gates.m.brown2.civ@mail.mi).

The creation of the atomic bomb changed the United States' approach to warfare. Its initial monopoly of the weapon led to shrinking defense budgets and a strategic reliance on the Bomb to deter future conflicts more effectively than could conventional forces. This policy changed quickly during the Cold War, as the Soviet Union acquired its own nuclear weapons and the North Koreans invaded South Korea; it became clear that, even in the atomic era, limited war could help states attain their objectives. The pressing question was how to incorporate atomic weapons into a feasible, affordable defense strategy. Army leaders like generals Matthew Ridgway and Maxwell Taylor argued for a robust ground force—backed by an atomic arsenal—ready to fight limited wars to guard the “Free World” against communist threats. Air Force leaders like Gen. Curtis LeMay believed atomic weapons would be critical in future conflicts and that bomber aircraft would settle them before any ground units had time to deploy.

In the late 1940s, American defense leaders had to contend with reduced resources in an increasingly hostile strategic environment. As tensions heightened, assessments of Soviet power seemed to show that American and NATO troop strengths were inferior to those of the USSR and Warsaw Pact nations. The United States reacted with a strategic emphasis on atomic weapons to attrite enemy forces before ground combat began. But at the time American defense planners lacked the funding to implement such a strategy.

The Korean War was a touchstone for strategists in the early Cold War period. The Korean peninsula had no strategic-level targets that Air Force planners could strike. There were, of course, such targets in the USSR and China, but President Harry Truman's administration did not want to expand the war or seek to end it with an atomic strike. Generals Ridgway and Taylor saw Korea as proof of the ongoing need for a ready conventional force to fight limited wars.

The obvious value of the US Army in Korea nevertheless did not nullify Air Force arguments about the need to count on atomic bombs to win future wars quickly and without deploying tens of thousands of ground troops. Air Force leaders stressed that air power could reduce the risks of war both to US troops and the American civilian population. They also maintained that air power trumped sea power because atom bombs would terminate any armed conflict long before battleships and aircraft carriers could fully deploy. Throughout the 1950s, the Air Force essentially won the strategic argument and secured the great majority of US defense dollars.

In *To Kill Nations*, Edward Kaplan (US Air Force Academy) explains in detail how General LeMay and others positioned the Air Force as the main arm of US defense forces, and how, consequently, Army leaders had little success in securing more funds for conventional deterrence forces in light of President Dwight Eisenhower's preference for decreased defense spending in general.

In the same period, US defense leaders altered their war planning in response to more and (seemingly) more accurate intelligence concerning Soviet capabilities. Although the USSR had made great strides in extending its atomic power projection, US intelligence agencies usually overestimated Soviet

capabilities. By the end of the 1950s, however, intelligence estimates correctly showed that the USSR could target most of the United States with hydrogen bombs, which had yields in the megaton rather than kiloton range. Air Force leaders thus argued for development of bombers and missiles superior to the Soviets' in anticipation of a possible atomic attack. Moreover, military planners warned that response times, in the event of an attack, would have to go from days or hours to *minutes*.

The Air Force's reaction to the time factor was simple: stay ahead. Technologically, air-atomic advocates pushed weapon systems steadily forward. Ballistic missiles joined—but did not replace—higher and faster bombers from 1957.... Throughout the 1950s, SAC [Strategic Air Command] pared away at the time to launch a decisive attack. A 1952 editorial' ... stated, "We must, in a sense, take off when we hear the enemy warming his engines." The essential idea was to hit the Soviets decisively before they could react.... Rapid reaction and overwhelming firepower would win the day. (82)

To speed up response times, more forces must be ready to fight instantly. Kaplan shows that Air Force leaders argued persuasively that air power was uniquely suited to deter or, if need be, win an atomic war almost independently.

By the time President John F. Kennedy took office, the Air Force view of national security had set the paradigm. His secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, instituted a policy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) to force changes in the Pentagon and to include senior civilian leaders in a decision-making process that had previously been a military-only affair.

Kaplan stresses the Kennedy administration's changes in atomic policy and strategy. As the number and yields of bombs increased, the scale of destruction of any atomic conflict grew exponentially. A nuclear war with the Soviet Union would—win or lose—kill tens of millions of Americans. Given such a dramatic escalation in the lethality of war, Kennedy sought to make conventional, non-nuclear war the main tool of US defense policy. This in turn meant that the Air Force's need for the best technology came under careful scrutiny. Since MAD presupposed that no winners could emerge from an atomic war, the strategic focus must be on deterrence. Kaplan argues that this change in thinking marked the end of the air-atomic period in American security policy and, concomitantly, of the dominance of the Air Force in discussions of national security.

There are many other studies of weapons development and Eisenhower and Kennedy's approaches to national defense.² The great strength of Kaplan's is his tracing of the evolution of US policy in response to perceived Soviet capabilities. He astutely demonstrates how the Berlin and Cuban missile crises exposed the drawbacks of preparing primarily for an atomic war with the Soviet Union. The failure of air-atomic strategy caused a needed shift of defense budget priorities from strategic overkill to more realistic military options. Kaplan writes that this was no panacea, but more like radical surgery to save a patient's life—the best of the bad options.

The book has a few shortcomings. More information about details of aircraft and missile technology would have helped to clarify their effects on policy. Also, there is little discussion of NATO's role or the need for US security policy, including atomic strategy, to further both American and alliance interests.

To Kill Nations will enlighten readers seeking an intelligent overview of the evolution of airpower strategy in the first twenty-five years of the Cold War as well as, more specifically, President Eisenhower's New Look security policy and Robert McNamara's influence on national security strategy during the Kennedy administration.

1. "Jet Strategic Bombardment-1952," *Air Univ. Quarterly Review* 5 (1951-52) 19.

2. See, most recently, Nicholas Michael Sambaluk, *The Other Space Race: Eisenhower and the Quest for Aerospace Security* (Annapolis: Naval Inst. Pr, 2015), with review at *MiWSR* 2016-118, and Sarah Bridger, *Scientists at War: The Ethics of Cold War Weapons Research* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2015), with review at *MiWSR* 2016-114.