



## *Winning Armageddon: Curtis LeMay and Strategic Air Command, 1948–1957* by Trevor Albertson.

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*Winning Armageddon* is a revisionist history of the military thought of Curtis LeMay while he was commander of Strategic Air Command (SAC) in 1948–57. Drawing heavily on LeMay's private papers, in particular his working diaries, historian Trevor Albertson (Air Command and Staff College) blends biographical research with organizational history to clarify the major strategic and operational debates that gripped SAC early in the Cold War.

Albertson's thesis is that mainstream historiography has misrepresented LeMay's thinking about Cold War nuclear strategy, specifically his preference for a controversial pre-emptive posture. He seeks to demonstrate that LeMay was no longer simply the hard-boiled militarist who directed war-time raids over Germany and Japan, but a pragmatic operational commander seeking solutions to the intractable problem of prevailing in nuclear warfare:

LeMay was neither angel nor demon; he was a pragmatist that saw an opening. If that meant he had to drop the first bombs in a nuclear war to protect his country—at least in his estimation—then so be it. (225)

Less persuasive is the author's contention that this position prevented the Cold War from becoming "hot." He does not make clear the extent to which LeMay's theories influenced official nuclear policy, the evolution of NATO strategy, or the course of the Cold War. At times, he claims LeMay, as "chief nuclear policy innovator, ... [enjoyed] extraordinary access to and influence with the most senior military and policy leaders in government" (91, 172). Yet, as he himself admits, LeMay's prophesying about nuclear war ultimately reached an intellectual and policy dead-end. But he does not try to explain why LeMay's brand of nuclear deterrence failed to meaningfully shape NSC 68,<sup>1</sup> Pres. Dwight Eisenhower's "New Look" at defense policy, or the John Kennedy administration's search for flexible responses to Soviet aggression.

Unsurprisingly, Albertson observes that World War II was the formative experience in LeMay's military career and affected America's strategic culture and way of warfare. But he does not reveal in much detail the origins of LeMay's theories about the role of strategic airpower in the nuclear age. The reader is left to conclude that the idea of a pre-emptive airpower strategy originated with LeMay, which was far from the case. As the author certainly knows, the Italian airpower prophet Giulio Douhet was the first to articulate a pre-emptive role for strategic air forces.<sup>2</sup> Yet Albertson mentions neither him nor any of the other military thinkers<sup>3</sup> who contributed to the theory of airpower and nuclear strategy (including pre-emptive strategies) in this period.

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1. United States Objectives and Programs for National Security (1950).

2. In *Il dominio dell'aria* (1921); English trans.: *The Command of the Air* (NY: Coward-McCann, 1942).

3. E.g., John Slessor, Bernard Brodie, and Herman Kahn.

Given this, one may doubt whether LeMay really was gifted with “transformational airpower thought” (145).

While the author shows that LeMay was cognizant of the theory and practice of air warfare in history, he leaves unanswered key questions that might have advanced his overarching argument: did LeMay read Douhet and other airpower theorists? Did the arrival of nuclear weapons validate the theories of the interwar airpower prophets? More generally, what was LeMay’s academic and professional military education like? Albertson portrays the man as both a pragmatist with an “engineer’s mind” (131) and a military intellectual comfortable with abstract concepts and theory. History has, fairly or not, cast LeMay as a “doer” rather than a “thinker.” The present volume’s revisionist version of affairs only muddies the waters of that characterization.

Albertson too often assumes more prior knowledge in his readers than he should. Some background information on SAC’s origins and organizational culture and LeMay’s war-time experiences would have been welcome. There is no proper introduction to furnish needed context for the book’s major themes or to situate it within the wider literature. The narrative also bogs down in needless detail on LeMay’s routine activities in command; this may reflect an overreliance on a narrow set of primary sources and the author’s own military background. Thus, the book’s first ten pages concern not nuclear Armageddon or winning future wars, but LeMay’s thoughts on service welfare and housing policies. There is too much about inspections, personal protection, luncheons with the president (but not about what they discussed), and even LeMay’s hobbies.

That said, the book contains much original and discerning analysis of the political and operational constraints on any strategy of nuclear pre-emption. For example, Albertson examines attempts by LeMay and his staff to induce the United Nations to redefine “aggression” so as to legitimate a SAC first strike in the event of Soviet mobilization. His book is good as well on the practical difficulties of devising a pre-emptive nuclear strategy, especially with regard to overseas basing, intelligence, and doctrine. Ultimately, its great strength is its synthesis of a mass of speeches, unpublished typescripts, and memoranda into a coherent narrative of strategic planning at the dawn of the nuclear age. *Winning Armageddon* will engage and instruct anyone interested in nuclear weapons, strategic theory, the history of SAC, and Curtis LeMay.