



The Bomber Mafia: A Dream, a Temptation, and the Longest Night of the Second World War by Malcolm Gladwell.

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“It isn’t working. You’re out.” —Norstad to Hansell (Jan. 1945)

Malcolm Gladwell, a prominent public intellectual and author of several bestselling nonfiction books on an array of topics,¹ began working on *The Bomber Mafia* as episodes in his entertaining podcast series, *Revisionist History*, which he describes as “a journey through the overlooked and misunderstood.” Gladwell’s curious mind and catholic range of interests, expressed in highly readable prose will engage anyone interested in World War II, be they specialists or general readers. It made for a compelling series of Gladwell’s podcasts even if the episode in question has been neither overlooked nor misunderstood.

Gladwell traces his obsession with bombers to his childhood, spent partly in England with a father who, as a boy himself, lived through the Blitz and the ensuing Allied bomber offensive against Germany. As an adult, the author was struck by the imposing personality of US Army Air Forces (USAAF) Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, the war’s most successful bomber commander and an epic figure in postwar history of the US Air Force.

The Allied bomber offensives against Germany and Japan are oft-told stories that lose nothing in Gladwell’s retelling; they focus on personalities, starting the “mafia” of prewar graduates of the Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS). He touches on such British political/military leaders as Churchill, his éminence grise Frederick Lindemann, and Air Chief Marshal Arthur “Bomber” Harris, whose “area bombing” strategy was diametrically opposed to what the USAAF leadership believed in and practiced. Not until early 1945, after Maj. General LeMay relieved Brig. Gen. Haywood Hansell in command of the XXI Bomber Command in the western Pacific, did the Americans switch to an area bombing strategy. Gladwell also profiles the idiosyncratic inventors of such technological innovations as the Norden bombsight, which failed to deliver the requisite precision for strategic bombing, and later the napalm that incinerated Japanese cities in 1945.

Gladwell’s tragic protagonist is Haywood Hansell, a prewar “true believer” and charter member of the “bomber mafia,” a graduate and later instructor at the ACTS at Maxwell Field, where he and others refined the doctrine of daylight precision bombing. Hansell, a brilliant officer gifted with a quirky personality, helped draft the Army Air Forces’ first strategic mobilization plan, the deservedly famous AWPD-1, which captured the scope of aircraft production and deployment that guided the rapid evolution of the largest air force in history. In 1942, he went to England as a senior officer within the 8th Air Force VIII Bomber Command, flying early USAAF missions over occupied Europe. This proved to be a rough learning process, with many early failures; a few

1. E.g., *Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston: Back Bay, 2002), *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (id., 2005), *Outliers: The Story of Success* (id., 2011), *Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know about the People We Don’t Know* (NY: Little Brown, 2019).

successes emerged only after the swift rise in rank of VIII Bomber Command's most intelligent and capable bomber group commander—Col. Curtis LeMay. The contrast between these two men is a leitmotif of Gladwell's book. Hansell was regarded as a visionary spokesman for the bomber mafia in regard to daylight precision bombing, while LeMay the consummate technician and tactician became the "Air Force's ultimate problem solver. (93)

After Hansell was brought back to Washington and the Air Staff, LeMay advanced into progressively more responsible positions and personally led the Regensburg force during the famous and costly Schweinfurt/Regensburg mission (Aug. 1943). The ball bearing factories in Schweinfurt, the primary target, sustained only moderate damage as against horrific losses within the USAAF bomber force. (In his memoir two decades later, LeMay noted that the bombers had been promised plenty of escort support from RAF and USAAF fighters, but remarked that "our fighter escort that day wore black crosses.") The losses on this mission prompted some soul-searching within the bomber mafia but clearly not enough: until the end of the European war, the USAAF deployed daylight bomber forces on precision strikes against industrial targets in Germany, while the RAF pursued its own controversial night-time area bombing campaign. Until late in the war, both the RAF Bomber Command and the USAAF VIII Bomber Command suffered horrendous losses while inflicting enormous civilian casualties in Germany.

The crux of Gladwell's story concerns Hansell's later efforts in the western Pacific as head of the XXI Bomber Command's B-29 force based in the recently captured Mariana Islands and his failure to mount an effective daylight strategic bombing campaign against the Japanese home islands. This despite having at his disposal the most advanced heavy bombers of the war, equipped with the sophisticated Norden bombsight, augmented with advanced ground mapping radar for increased accuracy. Fast moving weather fronts and high-altitude winds posed serious problems; over Japan, the B-29 crews discovered the hitherto under-researched jet stream. In short, the deck was stacked against Hansell, the bomber mafia poster boy, as he struggled to implement the hallowed ACTS doctrine of precision daylight bombing. He was relieved by the pragmatic and ruthless Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay, who had remained quietly outside the mainstream of the bomber mafia, despite some notable prewar accomplishments in long-range overwater navigation and intercepts of ships far out to sea.

LeMay had been handpicked to head up the other B-29 force, the XX Bomber Command based in India and operating with immense difficulty from bases in China against Japanese targets in mainland China, Southeast Asia, and eventually against Japan's home islands. Logistical challenges—the stupendously difficult forward deployment of fuel and maintenance resources across the Himalayan mountain range—kept LeMay's bombing campaign from being any more successful than Hansell's. That said, LeMay's failures were not of his making and prewar dogma was less of an issue.

The "missing man" in Gladwell's story is the USAAF Commanding General, Henry H. "Hap" Arnold. The costly, accelerated development and deployment of the B-29—"The most expensive single undertaking of the Second World War" (29)—represented a stupendous gamble by Arnold. He believed a successful bombing campaign against the Japanese home islands was vital not only to the American war effort but to his continuing tenure as head of the Army Air Forces and the future of that branch of the service. To this end he sent a trusted deputy, Brig. Gen. Lauris Norstad, to the western Pacific in early 1945 with authority to order a change of command, if he judged it necessary. Shortly after relieving Hansell, LeMay introduced a momentous tactical shift: low-altitude night-time bombing of industrial cities. Napalm, another wartime innovation, proved fearsomely effective. The 1945 bombings killed many thousands of civilians and pushed Japan's

leaders to the edge of surrender; the two atomic bombs gave the Emperor the upper hand to face down his generals and agree to a capitulation.

Gladwell has been rightly castigated by some early reviewers for casually ignoring the morality of bombing civilians, omitting a major dimension of the convoluted saga of strategic bombing in World War II. It also inverts the issue: the “bomber mafia” of the Air Corps Tactical School were not moralists seeking a way to win wars humanely, but strategists who saw precision bombing as the best way to destroy the enemy’s war industries and force them to make peace. Gladwell scarcely mentions that these men were practical students of war who also considered other approaches to strategic bombing. The combustibility of Japan’s wooden industrial cities was known and discussed long before 1945, when the “endgame” was on the horizon.

Some of Hansell’s B-29s made limited incendiary raids in late 1944 with mixed results. LeMay’s XXI Bomber Command achieved decisive results, with tragic consequences for the Japanese. Even today, the morality of bombing civilians is hardly a settled issue. That many of those civilians were engaged in industrial war production is indisputable, making them, arguably, as culpable as uniformed combatants. But did they choose to put their families at risk? The debate is far from resolved.

Many readers will dislike Gladwell’s superficial engagement with the consequences of the firebombing of Japanese cities and his blithe acceptance of the postwar USAAF narrative—that this horrific campaign (including the use of atomic bombs) was a “lesser evil” that hastened the end of the war. “Curtis LeMay’s approach brought everyone—Americans and Japanese—back to peace and prosperity as quickly as possible” (197). But Gladwell stresses that other high-ranking military and political figures in Washington and the Far East may not have grasped the nature and scope of LeMay’s air campaign.

To the extent that the war planners back in Washington conceived of a firebombing campaign, they thought of hitting six Japanese cities, not sixty-seven.... People like [Secretary of War] Stimson and [General] Stilwell could not—or would not—wrap their minds around what LeMay was doing” (194–95).

While in China commanding the XX Bomber Command, LeMay tried to explain to General Stilwell, the senior Army commander, what he hoped to accomplish with the destruction of Japanese cities. Many months later, after the Japanese surrender, Stilwell toured the ruins of urban Japan and apologized to LeMay for what he hadn’t understood at first: “it didn’t dawn on me until I saw Yokohama” (191).

Gladwell concludes with a leap ahead to the present day, when precision bombing has become commonplace, thanks to technological advances like GPS and electro-optical sensors. The dreamers of the Air Corps Tactical School back in the 1930s have been vindicated. In closing the author states that “Curtis LeMay won the battle. Haywood Hansell won the war” (206). I am less certain of that. Precision strikes nearly always inflict collateral damage. In today’s “sandbox wars,” the victims of such killings are often innocent civilians and family members of “high value targets.” Hence, precision notwithstanding, there is a residual human cost to waging war from the air. Curtis LeMay, nobody’s fool, realized that, if the Allies lost the war, he would be prosecuted as a war criminal. Does a latter-day “bomber mafia” have the same understanding?