BOMBS AWAY – GENERAL CURTIS LEMAY
UNAPOLOGETIC CHAMPION OF WAGING TOTAL WAR

From bomber general and self-professed war criminal to head of Strategic Air Command, Curtis LeMay divided America but always kept it safe.

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After implementing bombing strategies that reduced many German cities to rubble, Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay moved on to the Pacific Theater of Operations, where he organized the bombing campaign against Japan

Incredibly, in May 1938, even as war loomed in Europe, the U.S. Navy had no Atlantic Fleet to defend the East Coast. The fledgling U.S. Army Air Corps boasted that its new *Boeing B-17 bombers* could fill the gap and would prove it by *finding the inbound Italian cruise liner SS Rex hundreds of miles out at sea*. *The lead navigator on that mission, 32-year-old 1st Lt. Curtis LeMay*, had to predict the ship's position, compensate for storm winds on his speed and course, and contend with a planeload of reporters and radio announcers ready to broadcast his success or failure live. Journalist MacKinlay Kantor, who would co-author LeMay's biography, wrote, "His name was LeMay, but at the moment it might have been DisMay."

That February LeMay, one of the Air Corps' best navigators, had guided a diplomatic flight of YB-17s to Buenos Aires, Argentina. This was different. "It had all been dead reckoning," he remembered of the *Rex* mission, "there were no cities or rivers or any other landmarks underneath—only thousands of square miles of agitated water."

On May 12, 1938, YB-17s led by chief navigator 1st Lt. Curtis LeMay used dead reckoning to locate the Italian liner Rex 775 miles off the U.S. East Coast. (U.S. Air Force)

He had calculated time-on-target as 12:25 p.m. At 12:23, under a low ceiling, his three-ship YB-17 formation had nothing in sight.

Then, as LeMay recalled, precisely on time and 775 miles from land, "A crew member's shout of 'There she is!' almost blasted off our headsets."

The New York Times called LeMay's feat "a striking example of the mobility and range of modern aviation," and Time magazine gave it two pages of coverage, even though it reported his last name as "Selby."

Since its inception in 1926, the Air Corps had struggled against opponents in the Navy who refused to believe bombers could eclipse their shiny battleships and aircraft carriers as long-range weapons, as well as members of its ranks who thought bombing should be relegated to the short-range, tactical battlefield role. Though *trained as a fighter pilot*, Ohio-born LeMay had become a disciple of the "Bomber Mafia," the clique of 1930s generals who believed that strategic bombing of infrastructure and manufacturing could impose America's will on its enemies. As he later asserted: *"Flying fighters is fun. Flying bombers is important."*

And the sleek B-17 Flying Fortress was the premier American ground pounder of the day. "It was the first of our four-engine bombers and, in many ways, the greatest," said LeMay. "…I fell in love with the 17 at first sight."

In the 18 months after Pearl Harbor promotions came quickly. LeMay rose to full colonel, whipping four squadrons of inexperienced recruits into the 305th Bomb Group of the Eighth Air Force in England. "You must train as you plan to fight," he told his men. "…There is no room for second best. Measure up or get out."

His hard-driven crews called him *"Iron Ass LeMay*." He completely understood. "I wasn't real, I wasn't human," he admitted. "*I was a machine."*

He needed to be. Against German interceptors and anti-aircraft fire, the first Americans over occupied Europe judged it fatal to fly straight and level over the target for more than 10 seconds, making precision bombing impossible. LeMay would not accept that: "You couldn't swing evasively all over the sky without throwing your bombs all over the lot too."

From the top turret of his lead bomber, he arranged his squadrons into rigid, staggered "combat box" formations, their massed machine guns covering each other. On November 23, 1942, they joined a 58-plane raid on the U-boat pens at Saint-Nazaire, France. "I told my outfit that I was going straight in," recalled LeMay, "and that I thought we could get away with it, and that I would be flying the lead aircraft."

They spent seven minutes over the target without a loss. "We made the longest, straightest bomb run which had ever been made by B-17s over the continent of Europe," LeMay declared.

Colonel LeMay congratulates a B-17 crew of his 305th Bomb Group at RAF Chelveston in 1943.

His combat box became the primary Eighth Air Force bomber formation, and LeMay was promoted to command of the 4th Bombardment Wing. Still, when beyond fighter escorts, American bombers took horrific casualties.

During the infamous August 17, 1943, attack on German ball-bearing plants in Schweinfurt and Messerschmitt fighter factories in Regensburg, LeMay flew at the front of a 15-mile-long stream of unescorted B-17s that German interceptors picked off at will.

His B-17s destroyed or badly damaged all six main plants at the Messerschmitt factory, *but of 376 bombers on the mission, 60 were lost*. "Our fighter escorts had black crosses on their wings," he grumbled.

With the enemy making it prohibitively expensive in lives and aircraft to bomb factories and infrastructure, American strategists changed objectives. If bombers could not break the enemy's ability to fight, they would break its will. Like every other combatant in the war*, the U.S. would carpet-bomb cities.*

LeMay, *appointed brigadier general in September 1943*, approved of the strategy. "There are no innocent civilians. It is their government and you are fighting a people; you are not trying to fight an armed force anymore*. So it doesn't bother me so much to be killing the so-called innocent bystanders."*

With the British bombing by night and the Americans by day, German cities were reduced to rubble, suffering five-figure casualties per raid, with large swaths rendered uninhabitable. The results of Allied bombing on Nazi war production are debated to this day, but according to postwar *studies up to 305,000 civilians were killed, 780,000 were wounded and 7.5 million were left homeless, with almost half a million homes destroyed*. More than 90 percent of the survivors attributed Germany's defeat to aerial bombing.

In June 1944, Maj. Gen. LeMay was transferred to the China-Burma-India Theater and then, in January 1945, to the Mariana Islands. Using the advanced Boeing B-29 Superfortress, *he would do to Japan what he had done to Germany.*

The B-29 "Dauntless Dotty" is bombed up on Saipan for a mission to Tokyo in November 1944.

In the 200-mph jet stream over frequently socked-in Japan, *the trouble-prone B-29s*—in LeMay's opinion, *"the buggiest damn airplane that ever came down the pike"*—often had difficulty just reaching cloud-covered cities, much less bombing them. During their first Tokyo raid from the Marianas, on November 24, 1944, only about 10 percent had managed to hit the target. "We were still going in too high," he remembered, "still running into those big jet stream winds upstairs. Weather was always bad."

None of that mattered to LeMay's superiors, however. "If you don't get results," he was told, "it will mean eventually a mass amphibious invasion of Japan, to cost probably half a million more American lives."

LeMay came up with a diabolical solution*: If the Superfortresses couldn't bomb from high altitude in broad daylight, then they would do it from low altitude at night*. Without high winds or Japanese fighters to battle, they could carry less fuel, fewer guns, and more bombs. And the bombs would be incendiaries—M47 phosphorus bombs and M69 napalm cluster bombs—for which traditional Japanese homes of wood and bamboo, walled with paper screens and floored with rice straw mats, *would be little more than tinder and kindling*.

"No matter how you slice it," LeMay told himself, "*you're going to kill an awful lot of civilians. Thousands and thousands*. But….We're at war with Japan. Japan attacked us. *Do you want to kill the Japanese, or would you rather have more Americans killed?"*

To this day *Operation Meetinghouse*, the firebombing of Tokyo by *279 B-29s* on the night of March 9-10, 1945, *remains the single most destructive air raid in history and the most controversial.*

Superfortresses flew single file over the city, dropping 2,000 tons of incendiaries, destroying almost 16 square miles. More than a million people were left homeless and as many as 125,000 were wounded.

Japanese authorities needed three weeks to clear away the bodies*. How many burned to ashes in the inferno will never be known. Estimates range from 80,000 to over 200,000 dead—*more than in the atomic blasts of either Hiroshima or Nagasaki—and almost all of them were women, children, and the elderly. The Americans lost 14 bombers and 96 airmen.

Brig. Gen. Thomas Power (right) reports to Maj. Gen. LeMay (center) on the results of the Tokyo firebombing raid he led on March 9-10, 1945.

***"I suppose if I had lost the war, I would have been tried as a war criminal,"* LeMay reflected years later. "Fortunately, we were on the winning side….All war is immoral, and if you let it bother you, you're not a good soldier."**

LeMay didn't let it bother him. Over mid-1945 he lit up city after city, halting only when he ran out of firebombs. He would consider atomic weapons unnecessary: "We felt that our incendiary bombings had been so successful that Japan would collapse before we invaded."

By war's end his command, operating more than 1,000 Superfortresses, was the deadliest air force on earth, *having killed at least 220,000 Japanese civilians, possibly more than 500,000, and left five million homeless.* When he stood on the deck of the battleship *Missouri* to witness the signing of the peace treaty, LeMay saw to it that hundreds of his B-29s thundered overhead.

As World War II transitioned into the Cold War, LeMay relocated to England in charge of the new USAFE, United States Air Forces in Europe, rebuilding the downsized command just in time. When the USSR blockaded West Berlin, he recommended immediately bombing Soviet air bases in East Germany. "I think we would have cleaned them up pretty well, in no time at all," he boasted.

Instead Western powers opted for an airlift. LeMay threw himself into the effort with equal enthusiasm, commandeering cargo planes from all over the Free World to fly supplies into the beleaguered city. *Cynics called the Berlin Airlift "LeMay's Coal and Feed Company*," but at the height of operations, it was delivering almost 13,000 tons of supplies daily, with a transport touching down in West Berlin every 30 seconds. LeMay found it personally gratifying to sustain the city, still full of rubble from his bombs. "We had knocked the place down….Now we were doing just the opposite," he noted. "We were building and healing."

With his demonstrated expertise in assembling air forces from scratch, LeMay was called upon to take over what was to be America's main weapon of the Cold War, the new *Strategic Air Command*. "

This had occurred right at the time [1948] when the Air Force had gone to utter hell," he asserted. "…We didn't have one crew, *not one crew* in the entire command who could do a professional job."

On his principle that "A force that cannot fight and win will not deter," LeMay had just started building up SAC when the Cold War flared hot again. "I suggested informally, when the Korean flap started in 1950, that we go up north immediately with incendiaries and delete four or five of the largest towns," he recalled.

His advice was not followed. The fighting raged down almost to the tip of South Korea, up to the border with Red China, and back down to the Demilitarized Zone, a draw. "And what happened?" LeMay demanded. "We burned down about every city in North Korea and South Korea *both*.

Accused of being heartless, LeMay thought himself pragmatic. "I think it's more immoral to use less force than necessary than it is to use more," he reasoned. "If you use less force, you kill off more of humanity in the long run, because you are merely protracting the struggle."

President John F. Kennedy confers with General LeMay and Air Force officers during the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis

To that end, LeMay, *now a four-star general*, molded SAC to win a war—a nuclear war—from the outset. Its motto was "Peace is Our Profession," but its task was to prevent a Soviet first strike, stop any Warsaw Pact advance into Europe and then carry the war to the Russian heartland, obliterating 70 picked cities within 30 days. *LeMay kept America's ever-growing fleet of B-36 Peacemakers, then B-47 Stratojets, B-58 Hustlers, and B-52 Stratofortresses*, in a constant state of readiness, with bases around the world, midair refueling, aerial command centers and strategic bombers flying 24 hours a day prepared to strike on a moment's notice.

Yet SAC—and LeMay, *a man of proven willingness to kill civilians by the hundreds of thousands in pursuit of victory—was a weapon too terrible for Washington to unleash. Even as he rose to chief of staff of the Air Force, LeMay found himself butting heads with presidents.*

John F. Kennedy canceled his pet project, the supersonic XB-70 Valkyrie bomber, in favor of intercontinental ballistic missiles. (LeMay oversaw SAC's ICBM program but was not a proponent. "Missiles are spectacular and they play their role," he said, "*but they have no sense of loyalty; they can't think; they can't be recalled.")*

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy refused to let LeMay bomb the island's launch sites, and during the Vietnam War Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara also restricted bombing, lest it draws the Soviets and Chinese into the war.

"He was the finest combat commander of any service I came across in war," McNamara said of LeMay, "but he was extraordinarily belligerent, many thought brutal."

750-pound bombs await loading on B-52s in preparation for an airstrike on North Vietnam.

LeMay's answer to the North Vietnamese was, unsurprisingly, "Tell them they've got to draw in their horns and stop their aggression, or we're going to bomb them back into the Stone Age." Author Kantor was accused of inventing that quote for LeMay's biography, but it came to exemplify his approach to war.

Arguably Operation Linebacker II, the strategic bombing of North Vietnamese military and industrial targets in December 1972—the largest USAF bomber operation since World War II—proved LeMay right. It forced Hanoi back to the negotiating table and gave the U.S. a way out of the conflict. *By that time LeMay had retired—some would say he was eased out—but not before wearing four stars longer than any other general in American military history.*

In 1968 he campaigned for vice president on the third-party ticket of former Alabama governor George Wallace, once a sergeant under LeMay's command, but LeMay differed with Wallace's segregationist views and his brusque manner didn't play well. One journalist called him "about as politically graceful as a rhino in a game of ice hockey."

Third-party presidential candidate George Wallace (left) and his running mate, LeMay, wave to a crowd during a 1968 rally in Newark, N.J

America had changed. In the 1950s LeMay had been the "Big Cigar" or the "Iron Eagle," the personification of a strong United States. In the 1960s he was "Bombs Away LeMay" or even the "Demon," a warmongering monster. Hecklers gave Nazi salutes to the man who had done as much as anyone to crush the Nazi menace. *LeMay shrugged, "I was a hero one day and a bum the next."*

He and his wife Helen married 56 years, were instrumental in founding the Air Force Village Foundation (part of today's Air Force Assistance Fund) in San Antonio, Texas, for surviving USAF spouses.

"I always think that if he had a legacy at all, it would have been that he cared for everyone in that [SAC] command," remembered his daughter, Jane LeMay Lodge. "Everyone played an important part and he wanted each one of them to have the best pay and the best housing that the military could provide."

Perhaps only his troops remember LeMay, *who died in 1990 at age 83*, for that. Today he's regarded more as history's greatest proponent of strategic bombing—relentless and ruthless—but in the end, Curtis LeMay was not pro-war, he was pro-victory. *"If you go to war," he maintained, "you go to win it."*

GEN LEMAY'S STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND BOMBERS

BOEING B-17 "FLYING FORTRESS"
IN SERVICE 1939-1945

BOEING B-29 "SUPERFORTRESS"
IN SERVICE 1944-1960

CONVAIR B-36 "PEACEMAKER"
IN SERVICE 1949-1959

BOEING B-47 'STRATOJET"
IN SERVICE 1952-1971

CONVAIR B-58 "HUSTLER"
IN SERVICE 1960-1970

BOEING B-52 "STRATOFORTRESS"
IN SERVICE 1954 - ???

“Peace is Our Profession"

B-58 Hustler On Static Display - Little Rock AFB

B-47 Stratofortress On Static Display - Little Rock AFB