

The “Revolt of the Admirals” focused on the big bomber, but the real issues ran much deeper.

The Battle of the B-36

By Herman S. Wolk

THE 1949 “Revolt of the Admirals,” which initially focused on the Air Force’s B-36 intercontinental bomber, was one of the most bitter public feuds in American military history. This controversy over strategy and weapons began with the 1945–47 struggle over unification, when the US Army Air Forces (AAF) was fighting to become an independent service.

Following World War II, Gen. of the Army Henry H. Arnold, Commanding General of the US Army Air Forces; Gen. Carl A. Spaatz; and Lt. Gen. James H. Doolittle emphasized that the demonstrated effectiveness of all forms of airpower made the AAF the lead service in the American defense phalanx. General Doolittle, testifying before the Senate Military Affairs Committee, pointed out that the Navy was no longer the first line of defense for the United States. The US required an independent Air Force featuring an in-being strategic atomic force that could deter any aggressor from initiating conflict. This would be the country’s strategic concept in the postwar era, and it was supported by President Harry S. Truman and Army



Above, after the conflict with the Navy was resolved, USAF Chief of Staff Gen. Nathan F. Twining (left) and Strategic Air Command Commander in Chief Gen. Curtis E. LeMay (right) show Italian President Giovanni Gronchi a model of the B-36. Opposite, a B-36, with four jet engines and six propellers on its 230-foot wingspan, fills the sky all by itself.

Chief of Staff Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, among others.

After the war, the Navy feared it might lose its air element to an independent Air Force and that even the Marine Corps might be lost. Moreover, the naval leadership, convinced that the Navy required everything to make it self-supporting in pursuit of its mission, opposed Truman’s and Eisenhower’s concept of mutually supporting services under unified command. In the Congressional hear-



ings on unification, General Eisenhower emphasized that economy would be a driving force in postwar defense matters and that the nation simply could not afford the Navy's concept of self-sustaining forces in the World War II mold.

The centerpiece of the Navy's vision was the carrier task force that, during the war, became central to its Pacific strategy. In the postwar period, Navy Secretary James V. Forrestal took the lead in promoting the maritime strategy of depending on larger and faster carriers and opposing the creation of an independent Air Force.

Compromise and Conflict

The National Security Act of 1947, which established the United States Air Force, clearly was a compromise. The Act, as well as the so-called "functions paper" (actually, Truman's Executive Order), failed to resolve roles-and-missions disputes among the services. The new Air Force and the Navy—at conferences at Key West, Fla., and Newport, R. I., in the spring and summer of 1948—could not work out their differences over the strategic atomic

mission and other functions questions.

The Air Force relied on the B-36 intercontinental-range bomber to accomplish the strategic mission supporting the Truman Administration's policy of deterrence. In August 1941, Robert A. Lovett, assistant secretary of war for Air, and Maj. Gen. George H. Brett, chief of the Army Air Corps, determined that the potential loss of bases in the United Kingdom called for development of a long-range bomber that could fly a round trip from the US to Europe. Until that time, no aircraft had even approached this proposed range of 10,000 miles.

Immediately after the creation of USAF in September 1947, criticism of the B-36 began appearing in newspapers and journals. Some of this criticism came from Hugh L. Hanson, a Navy employee with the Bureau of Aeronautics, who had also contacted Forrestal, now Defense Secretary, and several Congressmen. The Secretary of the Air Force, Stuart Symington, complained about this to the Secretary of the Navy, John L. Sullivan. Nevertheless, the attacks continued.

In 1948 and 1949, the Air Force made several decisions that led to Strategic Air Command's reliance on the B-36 for the SAC atomic deterrent mission until the B-52 long-range bomber could enter the operational inventory. In 1948, following the Soviet-inspired Communist coup in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union's blockade of Berlin, the possibility of war increased. The Air Force emphasized that the B-36 was the only aircraft capable of delivering the atomic bomb from bases in the US.

In early 1949, SAC Commander in Chief Gen. Curtis E. LeMay recommended to Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, USAF Chief of Staff, that the Board of Senior Officers review the B-54 program because B-36 tests with jet pods had been outstanding. Compared to the B-54, the B-36 with jet pods was faster, operated at higher altitude, and had greater range and bomb-carrying capacity. Subsequently, the B-54 was canceled. Symington informed Secretary Forrestal that the B-36 could fly from the US and could, "because of its speed and altitude, . . . penetrate enemy country without fighter escort, destroy the strategic



Adm. Arthur Radford was one of the leaders of the Navy's charge against the B-36. He called the huge bomber "a billion-dollar blunder" and claimed that US reliance on strategic bombing was excessive.

target, and return nonstop to its base on this continent."

Stress and Suicide

Ironically, given the nature of the struggle then brewing between the Air Force and Navy over the B-36 and the atomic mission, Truman had named Forrestal as Secretary of Defense after Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson had turned down the post, pleading that his finances forced him to return to the private sector. Forrestal had led the campaign against a strong National Security Act and an independent Air Force. When he became the Defense Secretary, he showed himself to be a weak coordinator, unable under the new law to step in and resolve the many differences among the services.

Having failed to provide strong support to Truman's 1948 political campaign, Forrestal's influence waned significantly. At the same time, his health began to fail. He resigned in March 1949, in deep mental distress, and in May jumped to his death from a window on the sixteenth floor of the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md.

To replace Forrestal, Truman named Louis A. Johnson, a former assistant secretary of War (1937-40) who had served as the President's chief fundraiser during the 1948 campaign. Secretary Johnson began by reviewing military procurement programs and quickly focused on the Navy's

flush-deck supercarrier *United States* on which construction was to start in April 1949. The Navy estimated the cost of the carrier at \$190 million, but this figure failed to include the thirty-nine additional ships required to complete the task force. Total construction cost was \$1.265 billion, a staggering sum in 1949. Johnson immediately asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff as well as retired General Eisenhower for their opinions.

Adm. Louis E. Denfeld, Chief of Naval Operations, defended the supercarrier, calling it necessary "in the interest of national security." Gen. Omar N. Bradley, Army Chief of Staff, and General Vandenberg, Air Force Chief of Staff, strongly opposed construction, arguing that the supercarrier would duplicate the function of the Air Force's landbased bombers. Eisenhower also opposed building the carrier.

In late April 1949, after informing President Truman, Johnson abruptly directed that construction of the carrier stop immediately. Navy officials were outraged at not being informed of the decision. Navy Secretary Sullivan resigned in protest, emphasizing that the decision could have "far-reaching and tragic consequences." Rumors immediately surfaced within the Navy's high command that Johnson was pro-USAF and was determined to cut the Navy down to size.

The stage was now set. This bitter confrontation, precipitated by the Navy and its advocates, had been foreseen by General Eisenhower. "Someday we're going to have a blowup," he predicted in January 1949. "God help us if ever we go before a Congressional committee to argue our professional fights as each service struggles to get the lion's share. . . . Public airing of grievances . . . someday . . . will go far beyond the bounds of decency and reason, and someone will say, 'Who's the boss? The civilians or the military?'"

High-ranking naval officers, determined to make the case for the supercarrier and against the B-36, took action. The Navy's Op-23 "research and policy" office had been formed in December 1948. Capt. Arleigh A. Burke, a World War II destroyer commander and future Chief of Naval Operations, took charge of this office in early 1949. He placed Op-23 under tight security (causing the press to speculate that it was involved in shady business) and directed his people to collect detrimental data on the B-36 while amassing positive information on the supercarrier.

Going public, naval officers criticized the B-36 as being too slow and vulnerable to enemy defenses. This, however, was only the beginning of what turned out to be a vicious campaign to discredit not only the B-36 but also the top leadership of the fledgling Air Force. In April and May 1949, an "anonymous document" made its way around Washington, D. C., charging that Symington, Johnson, and Floyd B. Odlum, chairman of the board of Convair, had put the heat on the Air Force to buy B-36s, in spite of the bomber's deficiencies.

Brig. Gen. Joseph F. Carroll, director of Air Force Special Investigations, traced the anonymous document to Cedric R. Worth, a former Hollywood scriptwriter, who had served with the Navy during the war and was now an assistant to Dan A. Kimball, under secretary of the Navy. Glenn L. Martin, an aircraft manufacturer whose bombers had lost out to the B-36, had provided Worth with considerable data. A Navy court of inquiry subsequently determined that Cmdr. Thomas D. Davies, Op-23 deputy to Captain Burke, had also fed material to Worth.

The charges in the Worth document became public and reached the floor of the House of Representatives when Rep. James E. Van Zandt (R-Pa.), a Navy advocate with wartime naval service, called for an investigation of the allegations. Secretary Symington denied the charges and also requested an immediate investigation. Rep. Carl Vinson (D-Ga.), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, agreed to hold hearings. In June, the full committee consented to hear the B-36 procurement case and to hold an inquiry into strategy and unification issues. Thus began one of the most fractious public confrontations in US military history.

The Navy's supporters in the press held back nothing. Hanson Baldwin, military editor of the *New York Times* and a graduate of the Naval Academy, described Symington as one of the "nastiest" politicians in Washington, someone who had "ganged up on Forrestal." Baldwin charged that Symington had played "dirty pool and dirty politics, . . . [was] a two-faced goad who was not respected by most of the people in the Air Force." Baldwin even went so far as to claim that Symington was the only service secretary not asked to be a pallbearer at Forrestal's funeral because the family actually believed that he had contributed to Forrestal's death.

The Air Force Case

Vinson's committee held hearings

on B-36 procurement in August and on strategy and unification in October 1949. In June, Symington appointed W. Barton Leach, an Air Force Reserve colonel and Harvard Law School professor, to coordinate and direct the Air Force case for the B-36. Leach had served with Army Air Forces and had earned a reputation for incisive analysis of AAF operations in Europe.

He proceeded to organize the Air Force case by analyzing the charges, preparing replies to the allegations, making a study of the aircraft industry, preparing a memo on Symington's policies relative to the aircraft industry, collecting all Air Force statements on the heavy bomber program chronologically, analyzing all Inspector General reports on the B-36, and preparing an explanation of Air Force action on the B-36.

The result of Leach's massive effort was "A History of B-36 Procurement," which Vinson had requested and which formed the foundation of the Air Force's presentation to the committee. In early July 1949, the Air Force Association's third annual National Convention, held in Chicago, also helped counter the Navy's charges by disseminating material on the B-36 Peacemaker's mission and operational characteristics. At 45,000 feet, this intercontinental bomber was anything but vulnerable. Each day during the AFA meeting, seven B-36s flew up from Fort Worth, Tex., circled the fair area at low level, and

returned nonstop to Carswell AFB, Tex.

In regard to B-36 procurement, Symington informed the committee that "at no time since I have been Secretary has any higher authority attempted to recommend in any way the purchase of any airplane. . . . Every aircraft that was purchased by the Air Force during my tenure was recommended to me by the Chief of Staff of the Air Force and his staff." Modifications in the B-36 program were approved by Symington only after recommendations had been made by General Vandenberg, Lt. Gen. Lauris Norstad, and Gen. Joseph T. McNarney. Symington also strongly denied that he had ever discussed formation of a large aircraft combine with Floyd Odlum or any aircraft manufacturer.

Gen. George C. Kenney, a former SAC commander in chief, testified to the committee that, although he initially opposed production of the B-36, the bomber had been modified to be "the fastest, longest-range, best altitude-performing, and heaviest load-carrying bomber in the world." Had he changed his view under political pressure? No, replied Kenney. "If the bomber had the performance and would do the job that I was charged with carrying out, I would buy it."

General LeMay also took the stand, saying "I expect that, if I am called upon to fight, I will order my crews out in those airplanes, and I expect to be in the first one myself." Van Zandt questioned LeMay closely, but the SAC commander in chief insisted that the B-36 was the only bomber that could accomplish the intercontinental mission.

An extensive case study of the B-36 hearings by Professor Paul Y. Hammond of Johns Hopkins University, published in 1963, concluded that, "because of the careful preparation of the Air Force, no inconsistencies or contradictions capable of exploitation appeared in the testimony. The result was an impressive showing for the Air Force." In contrast, according to Hammond, the Navy's Op-23 office failed to provide much help to the Navy's witnesses. Moreover, noted Hammond, "most of the hostility that developed towards Op-23 was of the Navy's own making. . . . Op-23 was treated by the Navy from the beginning like dirty business; and



With its 160-foot length and forty-six-foot height, the B-36 was too large for most hangars, so USAF was forced to devise other solutions to allow mechanics to work on the bomber and yet be sheltered from the elements.



From 1951 to 1959—when the Cold War was at its frostiest—the B-36 stood alert twenty-four hours a day, serving as one of the main deterrents to aggression by the Soviet Union.

the press had soon drawn the same conclusion. Upon its establishment, it was located next to the Office of Naval Intelligence, and its activities from the beginning were subject to an unusual degree of secrecy."

The Vinson committee subsequently exonerated Symington and Johnson and stated that it found "not one scintilla of evidence [to] support charges that collusion, fraud, corruption, influence, or favoritism played any part whatsoever in the procurement of the B-36 bomber." According to the committee, Symington, the Air Force leadership, and Secretary of Defense Johnson made it through the hearings with "unblemished, impeccable reputations."

After the procurement hearings, the Navy immediately convened a board of inquiry to investigate the origin and release of the anonymous document supposedly written by Worth. Worth had, under oath, "recanted and repudiated" the allegations contained in the documents and was dismissed. The Navy's court of inquiry, however—although it found "distorted propaganda" against the Air Force—found no cause for disciplinary action against any of the Op-23 personnel, including Captain Burke and Commander Davies.

The twelve days of unification and strategy hearings, convened in October 1949, revealed a somewhat less definitive outcome than the procurement sessions had.

The Navy's witnesses before the House Armed Services Committee took their cue from Adm. Arthur W. Radford, who stated that he did not believe the threat of an "atomic blitz" provided a deterrent to war. He focused his guns on the B-36, calling it "a billion-dollar blunder" and claiming that, in his view, its poor performance made it a "bad gamble." He went along with the Joint Chiefs to the extent that he agreed that strategic bombing should be the primary role of the Air Force. However, Radford emphasized that the Air

Force and the nation had placed excessive reliance on this concept.

Strange Tales

Other Navy witnesses made similar arguments. Admiral Denfeld, the Chief of Naval Operations (who was relieved of his post at completion of the hearings), stressed the way in which the flush-deck carrier was canceled. Navy Cmdr. Eugene Tatom, head of research and development for aviation ordnance, made the stunning claim that "you could stand in the open at one end of the north-south runway at the Washington National Airport, with no more protection than the clothes you have on, and have an atom bomb explode at the other end of the runway without serious injury to you." Tatom's statement was labeled absurd by Secretary of Defense Johnson, Sen. Brien McMahon (D-Conn.) and Rep. Chet Holifield (D-Calif.) of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, and other members of Congress.

The strongest counterattack on the Navy's position was launched by Secretary Symington and General Vandenberg. Replying to the charge that the Air Force placed too much reliance on the B-36, Symington showed that, in Fiscal Years 1949 through 1951, the B-36 accounted for only 2.9 percent of the number of aircraft and 16.3 percent of the cost of all airplanes purchased by the Air Force.

This was telling testimony, but



The first Air Force Secretary, Stuart Symington (center), seen here with Gen. Carl Spaatz (left) and Gen. Hoyt Vandenberg, was attacked viciously during the battle for the B-36. Some went so far as to implicate him in Secretary Forrestal's suicide.

Radford, aware of these figures, chose to ignore them. Symington then zeroed in on the effectiveness of strategic bombing. He reminded the committee that strategic bombing had been approved and assigned to the Air Force by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "The most disturbing feature of the attacks against the Air Force," Symington said, "is what they have done and are doing to imperil the security of the US. It was bad enough to have given a possible aggressor technical and operating details of our newest and latest equipment. . . . It is far worse to have opened up to him in such detail the military doctrines of how this country would be defended."

Vandenberg reiterated Symington's points, reinforcing them with technical details and adding that, so far as the flush-deck carrier was concerned, "my opposition to building it comes from the fact that I can see no necessity for a ship with those capabilities in any strategic plan against the one possible enemy."

Following Vandenberg, General Bradley, now Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, unleashed heavy fire against the Navy. He said that the Navy's "careless detractions of the power of this [atomic] weapon have done national security no good and may have done our collective security, in these precarious times, untold harm." He wished that the Navy's testimony had never been delivered, he added. "This is no time," emphasized the usually mild-mannered Bradley, "for 'fancy dans' who won't hit the line with all they have on every play unless they can call the signals." The gut problem, according to General Bradley, was that the Navy had opposed unification from the start and had never completely accepted it.

This was a point *Air Force Magazine* made in a December 1949 retrospective on the strategy and unification hearings. It noted that the investigation left a great deal to be



Careers were ruined and reputations impugned in the "Revolt of the Admirals," but the B-36 vindicated its proponents before eventually finding its way to its final resting place in the desert at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz.

desired because it could not proceed in a logical manner; to be complete and comprehensive, the hearings would have to start with a consideration of the nation's classified war plans. This would have torpedoed the Navy's arguments. The magazine emphasized, however, that "the Admirals found, as a by-product of the hearing, that civilians still run the defense establishment as the provisions of the Constitution intended, and their reeducation in this particular was most timely."

Unreconstructed Admirals

This struggle, ignited by unreconstructed, high-ranking naval officers, had deep roots in the 1945–47 period, when the Army Air Forces won the battle to establish an independent Air Force. The Navy all along had been reluctant to cede the atomic mission to the AAF in a period of stringent budgetary cutbacks. This became especially critical when the Truman Administration made strategic deterrence the centerpiece of its postwar national security policy.

The Air Force, with the B-36, was front and center in the nation's defense establishment—hence, the Navy's unbridled attack on the B-36 bomber.

Years later, Stephen F. Leo, Symington's director of Public Relations, described the Navy in this era as being "out of control." The Navy had been dragged, kicking and screaming, into the National Security Act of 1947, and its opposition to a strong Secretary of Defense reflected a reluctance to join the unification team. General Bradley emphasized that the Navy had refused to accept unification "in spirit as well as deed."

Army Chief of Staff Eisenhower showed his frustration with the Navy when he stressed to the Congress that the postwar national security establishment had to be structured like a three-legged stool, each military service mutually supportive of the whole. This was the great lesson of World War II—mutually supporting services under unified theater command. It was a lesson that the Navy took some time to learn.

The extraordinarily able first Secretary of the Air Force, Stuart Symington, many years later described with enthusiasm to this author the B-36 confrontation and the Revolt of the Admirals as "a great battle." He might have added (because he surely knew) that it was a fight the fledgling US Air Force won. ■

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