

Long before Robert Lovett became Secretary of Defense, he helped Hap Arnold push for increased aircraft production, more pilots, and Air Force independence.

LOVETT

By Herman S. Wolk



Lovett, as Secretary of Defense, in 1951 is shown at his desk at the Pentagon. He was one of the earliest advocates of strategic bombing.

On Nov. 7, 1940, Maj. Gen. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Corps, welcomed Robert A. Lovett into the War Department. Arnold would later say Lovett, who became assistant secretary of war for air, was of “tow-

ering importance to our Air Force.” During World War II, Lovett became the indispensable point man for Arnold, greatly influenced aviation industrial policy, and aided the creation of the independent Air Force.

Lovett had been a Navy flier in World

War I, receiving the Navy Cross. He had taken flight training with a group of Yale undergraduates. The unit was inducted into active service by Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Lovett eventually flew bombing missions with a British unit based in France.

Subsequently, he commanded the Navy’s northern bombing group. Lovett came out of the war persuaded of the potential offensive power of the independent bombing mission.

Private-sector work frequently took him to Europe, and by 1940 he became concerned about the rise of German airpower. As a result, in October 1940 he conducted a tour of aircraft manufacturers in California, concluding that the American aircraft industry was far too weak to meet the requirements of war.

On entering the War Department in late 1940, Lovett wrote a report to Assistant Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson, detailing his concern about the ability of aircraft manufacturers to gear up to a wartime environment. “This is a quantitative war,” Lovett emphasized, but “the airplane industry has so far, been qualitative.”

In late 1940, Arnold was struggling to build up the American air arm. Now with the War Department, Lovett determined that aircraft procurement was in “a hell of a mess” and began to straighten out procurement and production.

This would be just the beginning of his work on the air arm during World War II. Lovett would subsequently fix the processes for training pilots; play a major part in reorganizing the Army air arm; advocate a greater role for bomber aircraft in the nation’s defense buildup; and take a leading role in the fight for an independent Air Force.

Through the force of his personality, Lovett was able to carry his recommendations to the highest levels of government—to President Roosevelt, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, and

the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. George C. Marshall.

Repairing Industrial Capacity

The US aircraft industry needed more effective procurement procedures, better standardization, and mass production. Arnold wanted to build an Air Force to meet the demands of war. Lovett knew how to do it. They took to one another from the start.

“I found in Bob Lovett,” Arnold emphasized, “a man who possessed the qualities in which I was weakest, a partner and teammate of tremendous sympathy and of calm and hidden force.” Arnold noted that when he became impatient, ranting about the War Department’s inadequacies, Lovett “would know exactly how to handle” him and calm him down.

Roosevelt, alarmed at the resurgence of the Luftwaffe, had called in 1938-39 for a huge expansion of the Air Corps. With Hitler’s blitzkrieg attack on Poland in September 1939, the issue of production for the Army’s air arm turned critical. Stimson stated that airpower was deciding the fate of nations. “We are,” he said, “in the midst of a great crisis. The time factor is our principal obstacle.”

The President, determined at all costs to keep Britain in the war against Nazi Germany, insisted that a major portion of America’s aircraft production be sent to Britain. He saw aircraft shipments to Allies as part of the lend-lease program. This presented Arnold with a big problem as he desperately tried to build an Air Force during a rapidly deteriorating situation in both Europe and the Far East. (See “When Arnold Bucked FDR,” November 2001, p. 86.)

It wasn’t that Arnold failed to understand Roosevelt’s view, but he felt strongly that “obligations to my own country and my own Corps were definite.” Between helping Allies, “and giving everything away, a realistic line must be drawn, or there would never be a United States Air Force except on paper,” Arnold stressed.

In July 1940, the British had 8,275 aircraft on order in the United States, almost four times the number the US had on order.

“It was the rosy dream of some Americans that we could save the world and ourselves by sending all our weapons abroad for other men to fight with,” said Arnold. “If this priority thus deprived our own airpower of even its foundation stones, certain people

seemed to take the view that it was just too bad.”

Things got so tense between Arnold and FDR that in early 1941 the air chief thought he might be relieved. However, Lovett persuaded Arnold to visit Britain to assess the situation firsthand. As a result, Arnold spent two weeks in England and was accorded an especially warm welcome by all levels of officialdom, including Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill and King George. Upon his return in early May, Arnold briefed Roosevelt and his Cabinet, and Arnold was out of the doghouse.

Lovett, meanwhile, realized that he had to build a reporting system that he and Arnold could rely on. They required accurate data on aircraft production, scheduling, spare parts, and numbers of pilots and ground crews. Arnold informed his staff that Lovett had “lost faith in our figures.”

Lovett proceeded to gather reliable information and structure his own reporting system. Although foreign aircraft orders contributed to building domestic aircraft production capacity, Lovett realized that the shortage of airplanes affected the output of pilots trained in the United States. This was a “grave situation,” and to Lovett the major problem remained aircraft deliveries to the British and other Allies.

Ramping Up Pilot Training

The US also needed more pilots for the aircraft it did have available. Believing that pilot and crew training needed to be immediately accelerated, Lovett in 1941 received approval from Arnold and Marshall to increase the pilot training program from 7,000 to 30,000 airmen annually.

“It takes many months,” he emphasized to Stimson, “adequately to prepare pilots and crews for modern aircraft.” Lovett was a proponent of going to college campuses to persuade graduates to undertake pilot training in the air arm.

Shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Lovett had to fend off Roosevelt and Arnold, who in his judgment were demanding unrealistic production figures. Roosevelt had called for greatly increased bomber production, determined to hit the enemy with long-range bomber aircraft. In the State of the Union address of 1943, Roosevelt said, “We will hit them from the air heavily and relentlessly,” and “the Nazis and the Fascists have asked for it, and they are going to get it.”

Roosevelt indicated to Stimson that he wanted 60,000 aircraft produced in 1942 and 125,000 in 1943. Lovett felt that this level of production was simply not possible.

Lovett was appalled at what he considered FDR’s casual production targets. “It is a little bit like asking a hen to lay an ostrich egg,” Lovett told Arnold. “It is unlikely that you will get the egg and the hen will never look the same.” Arnold did not flinch, replying that “if we can induce her to lay it, I, for one, feel that we must accept the wear and tear on the hen.”

This was pure Arnold, exhorting all—especially the aircraft manufacturers—to redouble their efforts. Like Roosevelt, he hated self-imposed obstacles. He reminded Lovett that “the negative assumption that requirements cannot be met, supported by facts as they are and not as we are capable of making them, too often has characterized thinking on this subject.”

Lovett however, did not back down: “I do not feel that I can have any part in supporting a program which, in my opinion, is likely to cause false hopes initially and bitter disappointment later. Therefore, I feel compelled to disassociate myself.” Reluctantly, Arnold later retreated and approved a production figure of 82,000 aircraft (vice 125,000) for 1943, which in retrospect proved to be wholly realistic for the “arsenal of democracy.”

Lovett remained a leading proponent of the long-range bomber during all of this. Arguing that the war made the case for offensive weapons, he pressed his case to Stimson, Marshall, and Roosevelt through FDR’s aide, Harry Hopkins.

“At irregular intervals in history,” Lovett pointed out, “some new development has altered the art of war and changed the fate of peoples and the world.” The evolution of the long-range bomber, he emphasized to Stimson, amounted to a “watershed” in the history of warfare.

With the immense difficulties in procurement, production, and pilot training, Lovett nonetheless never lost sight of the goal of air autonomy. He and Arnold saw the direct connection between accelerating these major areas of responsibility and the need to reorganize. When Lovett first joined the War Department, the Army air arm was split between the Air Corps—responsible for training, procurement, and personnel—and General Headquarters Air



Gen. H.H. "Hap" Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Forces during World War II (shown here in a 1944 photo), professed great admiration for Lovett.

Force, which maintained tactical units. The arrangement "resembled nothing in the world," Lovett stated, "so much as a bowl of spaghetti."

Pushing for Autonomy

This lack of unity in the air arm was partially solved by the June 1941 War Department reorganization that created the Army Air Forces. The reorganization provided Arnold with an Air Staff to formulate plans and policy and gave him responsibility to coordinate all air matters.

Lovett played a major role in the 1941 reorganization, holding discussions with Arnold and Brig. Gen. Carl A. "Tooney" Spaatz. Lovett presented the case for AAF establishment to Stimson. The major question at this time, according to Stimson, was to determine how far to go with air autonomy while still keeping the air arm as part of the Army.

Arnold, Spaatz, and Lovett continued to push for autonomy. (See "The Founding of the Force," September 1996, p. 62.) With the support of Stimson and Marshall, the reorganization of March 1942 gave the AAF equality with the Army Ground Forces and Service Forces.

This so-called "Marshall Reorganization" has been termed the most radical Army reorganization since creation of the General Staff in 1903. In Marshall's view, the War Department had become a giant bureaucracy, consumed in red tape, unable to get anything done. Ac-

ording to Lovett, in the General Staff "there was so much deadwood, the place was a positive fire hazard."

Lovett pointed out that the War Department staff not only had failed to push through air requirements, but maintained an antipathy to airmen. Consequently, crucial decisions were reached by the ground officers on the staff without regard to important air requirements. Marshall, realizing that the Army air arm would play a major

role in the global war, determined quickly to fix this problem.

Thus, with the 1942 reorganization, Arnold and Lovett were pleased, not only with equality with the ground and service elements, but with the fact that Army Chief of Staff Marshall clearly recognized that wartime requirements demanded air autonomy. "I do not think," Marshall emphasized, "that the public generally appreciated the vastness of the undertaking which has been imposed upon the Air Corps in both personnel and materiel."

At the same time, Stimson had been under increasing pressure from Congress to give the Army air arm complete independence. With implementation of the 1942 reorganization, Lovett promised the Secretary of War that he would do his best to tamp down the Congressional pressure. Lovett agreed with Arnold that, "while an independent Air Force may be a desirable ultimate aim," the time was not right for independence during a global conflict.

With the AAF heavily involved in Europe and the Pacific, the immediate goal, according to Lovett, was to bring the air forces up to wartime efficiency.

All the major players agreed that air independence should be put off. The War Department, Lovett pointed out, is drawing plans "to substitute reasonable autonomy for independence." Lovett also made the point that Marshall was in the midst of planning to give airmen



Lovett in 1947 takes the oath of office to become undersecretary of state. The oath was administered by Stanley Woodward, chief of protocol (right).



In this 1951 photo, Lovett (right), as deputy undersecretary of defense, greets Secretary of Defense George Marshall on Marshall's return from a trip to Japan and Korea. Lovett had worked for Marshall at the Department of State and had followed him to DOD.

autonomy within the War Department structure. The Air Corps, of course, supported this thrust, in a period when it was building up toward what Lovett termed "wartime efficiency." The air forces, he said, "must first learn to walk before they run."

An Independent Air Force?

The question of postwar military reorganization persisted. Congressional committees convened during the war, and the War Department and the AAF remained concerned about the Navy's land-based air operations, which triggered controversy over the anti-submarine mission. After discussions with Stimson and Lovett, in late 1943 Marshall asked the Joint Chiefs to agree in principle to postwar formation of a single Department of Defense.

This put the Navy in a difficult position. Adm. Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations, and Adm. William D. Leahy, chief of staff to Roosevelt, suggested additional study. As a result, a JCS Special Committee for Reorganization of National Defense was formed in 1944 and issued a report in April 1945 calling for a single department of national defense and an independent Air Force.

The lone dissenter on this committee was its chairman, Adm. James O. Richardson, who was opposed to a separate Air Force and argued for a continuation of the wartime system of coordination through JCS committees, the official Navy view.

Before the committee, Lovett made the case for an independent Air Force

and unified command. Resources, he emphasized, should be allocated with vision on what the nation needs for its national defense "and not on the tortured interpretation of antiquated documents dealing with vague theories and doctrines which have to be thrown away the moment war breaks out."

Thus, Lovett continued to press the case for a single department and an Air Force coequal with the Army and Navy. Lovett was obviously the Chief's spear-carrier on this issue. "Feeling as strongly as I do," he made clear to Spaatz, "I expect to be in more or less continuous hot water from now on as I am going to battle for a unified Air Force."

Appearing before a Congressional committee in the spring of 1944, Lovett emphasized the economic advantages of unification. The nation would benefit from having an organization "as modern as the instruments we use." Neither Lovett nor Arnold were satisfied with the War Department's postwar planning on air matters. At Lovett's urging, Arnold created two postwar planning offices in AAF Headquarters which subsequently formulated the 70-group objective for the postwar Air Force.

When Arnold in 1944 had difficulty appointing a committee to study the effects of strategic bombing in Europe, he asked Lovett to put it together. Informing

the AAF Chief that Roosevelt should appoint the committee members, Lovett thus took charge of organizing the US Strategic Bombing Survey.

Lovett recruited Franklin D'Olier, president of Prudential Insurance, to head the bombing survey. In June 1945, the survey's preliminary findings were given to Marshall, Arnold, and Lovett, thus influencing culmination of the B-29 campaign against Japan. Completed in early 1945, the survey—on Lovett's recommendation—made a strong case for postwar airpower and unification.

Lovett had long put forward the argument for the strategy of bombardment and blockade against Japan, which he thought would "nail them down until they sued for peace." He never thought that an invasion would be required to bring Japan down, and was ultimately proved correct.

Enduring Influence

After the war, Lovett was appointed undersecretary of state in 1947, by Secretary of State George C. Marshall. After Marshall moved to the Defense Department, Lovett later followed him to DOD as well. Lovett was named Secretary of Defense in 1951, during the Korean War, and held the position until Jan. 20, 1953.

Historian George Watson noted that the wartime relationship between Lovett and Arnold set the pattern for civilian-military interaction in the Army Air Forces and the War Department. Lovett was just the man to tamp down Arnold's rough edges.

Lovett was recognized as a man of great talent and integrity who could navigate with assurance at the highest levels of government. One of the earliest advocates of strategic bombing, Lovett was the official most responsible for solving the Army Air Forces' immense aircraft production problems during World War II. It was a crucial, daunting task that took well over two years to accomplish. Together with his work organizing pilot training and fighting for air autonomy, Lovett was a major contributor in building the small prewar Air Corps into the world's mightiest Air Force. That rapid evolution is unmatched in American military history. ■

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