

FDR and Hap Arnold frequently clashed, but their partnership brought about the mighty Army Air Forces.

Commander and Chief

By Herman S. Wolk



At an airfield in Sicily, Arnold (l) visits with FDR, whom Arnold called the Army Air Forces' best friend.

Little known today, it is a fact that President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold in World War II forged a strong working partnership, one that proved pivotal to the success of the Allied war effort. Roosevelt, as Commander in Chief, exercised a powerful influence upon Arnold, Chief of the US Army Air Forces, and thus on US airpower itself.

Up to his death in April 1945, Roosevelt was a staunch advocate for airpower and an ardent supporter of Arnold's use of the B-29 bomber and its attacks against Japan. The partnership went back further, to the prewar years. In the late 1930s, FDR and Arnold were sufficiently farsighted to press for a large increase in aircraft production and to build up the nation's air arm. Their actions proved fateful, as they got US

rearmament going before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor.

In September 1938, upon the death of Maj. Gen. Oscar Westover in an air crash, Roosevelt appointed Arnold as Chief of the Army Air Corps. (In 1941, the AAC and a separate Air Force Combat Command were placed under a new entity, the USAAF, with Arnold as Chief.) Arnold immediately pushed for a major expansion of Army aviation, along with Assistant Secretary of War Louis A. Johnson and Harry L. Hopkins, confidante to Roosevelt.

"Our former technical superiority in aeronautical development," Johnson stated, "is no longer clearly apparent. Recent advances in other countries have equaled if not exceeded our efforts. ... It now appears that our research and development programs must be accelerated if we are to regain our position of technical leadership."

Johnson's views were shared by Roosevelt, who formed a group to assess the aircraft manufacturing industry and also discussed the urgency of building up the air forces with Hopkins.

In a major turning point in the history of US airpower, Roosevelt convened a meeting at the White House on Nov. 14, 1938 to direct a huge expansion of the Air Corps.

Concerned about Nazi Germany's Luftwaffe, Roosevelt called for a program of 10,000 aircraft over two years. Arnold was elated, later claiming, "To the surprise, I think, of practically everyone in the room except Harry [Hopkins] and myself, and to my own delight, the President came straight out for airpower. Airplanes—now—and lots of them!"

Arnold correctly determined the Air Corps now had a realistic program. "A battle was won in the White House that

day,” Arnold emphasized. Roosevelt’s call for aircraft marked a significant policy change. The official Army history noted that the President “concentrated his attention wholly upon the air forces, which up to this time had been a secondary consideration in Army planning.”

Roosevelt in effect had turned the existing War Department policy upside down. He threw his weight and credibility behind Arnold and ordered a quick-start program. In the spring of 1939, Congress authorized \$300 million for an Air Corps of 6,000 aircraft.

When Germany attacked Poland on Sept. 1, 1939, with the Luftwaffe playing a key role, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson stated, “Airpower has decided the fate of nations.” In the wake of the German attack, Roosevelt and Arnold called for increased production of heavy bombers—the President informing Stimson that “no single item of our defense today is more important than a large four-engine bomber capacity.”

However, at times Arnold’s relationship with Roosevelt hit the rocks.

From 1939 to 1941, while Arnold attempted to build up the air arm, Roosevelt insisted on large numbers of production aircraft being sent to Britain. As a result, the British had more aircraft on order than the Air Corps during this time. Arnold persevered, emphasizing to Stimson and Army Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall that the US “still had no Air Force,” for in addition to aircraft, it required personnel, equipment, and bases.

In the spring of 1940, the relationship between Arnold and the President reached its nadir. Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr. recalled a two-and-a-half-hour meeting in March 1940 at which Roosevelt admonished Arnold. When discussing aircraft production distribution to the British, Roosevelt looked directly at Arnold and stated: “When people can’t control themselves and their people under them, you know what we do with those kind of people? We send them to Guam.”

Arnold, however, recouped with the support of Stimson, Marshall, and the assistant secretary of war for air, Robert A. Lovett—all of whom pressed Roosevelt on the importance of structuring an air force with war raging in the Far East and Europe. After Pearl Harbor, Arnold and Stimson recommended “a complete redistribution of aircraft production” to Roosevelt. “Not a plane can be unnecessarily given away,” Stimson informed FDR.

Roosevelt and Arnold soon got back on the same page, with the President inviting the airman to the White House in April 1942

to discuss what Stimson described as “a reorientation of our thought” to build “a powerful Air Force.” Modifying FDR’s call to be “the great arsenal of democracy,” the post-Pearl Harbor Roosevelt Administration determined the top priority now would be to build up US military power—with emphasis on the air forces.

In early 1942, Roosevelt and Marshall came to a decision that Arnold’s presence was required on the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Combined Chiefs of Staff.

An Act of Barbarity

At the CCS level, Air Chief Marshal Charles A. Portal, head of the RAF, weighed in for the British air position, and thus Arnold’s view was considered a necessity at the highest Allied strategic policy level. Roosevelt wanted Arnold and the AAF to retain a strong voice in making and implementing military policy, even though Arnold was subordinate to Marshall. A former assistant secretary of the Navy who did not especially like to fly, Roosevelt frequently eschewed the chain of command and insisted on writing Arnold directly or inviting him to the White House. This was unprecedented.

Marshall, clearly recognized the importance of airpower, pushed through the major War Department reorganization in March 1942—making the AAF coequal with the Army’s ground and service forces.

One of the most sensitive issues faced by Arnold and Roosevelt was atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial Army. It stayed in the forefront of Arnold’s mind especially after the Doolittle raid in April 1942. Roosevelt had ordered the raid and, according to Arnold, was “overjoyed” at the effect on US morale. The Japanese took eight of the Doolittle Raiders prisoner. Of these, three were executed by firing squad and another died in confinement. Four survived imprisonment.

In March 1943, after being informed of the execution by the Japanese of several of the Doolittle fliers, Roosevelt called Arnold to the White House. In April, the President released a statement condemning “this act of barbarity,” and informed the Japanese government that the US would hold “personally and officially responsible for these diabolical crimes all of those officers of the Japanese government who have participated therein and will in due course bring those officers to justice.” True to FDR’s pledge, in January 1946, four Japanese officers involved in the execution of these American airmen were convicted and sentenced by a US Military Commission.

Roosevelt was a keen student of strategic bombing. He followed the development of radar, observed attrition ratios, and was exceptionally interested in targeting. When AAF operational commanders came to Washington, FDR made it a point to invite them to the White House to discuss tactics and campaigns. Maj. Gen. George C. Kenney, Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s air commander in the Southwest Pacific, was not above “going over Arnold’s head,” and visited with Roosevelt when in Washington.

The President enjoyed this sort of contact with theater commanders, and closely followed the air war over China. He corresponded with Maj. Gen. Claire L. Chennault when in January 1944 Chennault suggested Operation Matterhorn be integrated into his Fourteenth Air Force operations. Roosevelt finessed the issue, stating “people here in Washington”—a reference to Arnold—needed to control the B-29s. Once deployed to the theater, however, FDR indicated the bombers would be assigned to Chennault. This never materialized because Arnold, as commander of the Twentieth Air Force, reported directly to the Joint Chiefs and he was not about to relinquish this control.

Meanwhile, Chennault and Lt. Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell, Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek’s chief of staff and commander of US forces in the China-Burma-India Theater, argued over strategy. Stilwell, a distinguished infantry officer, wanted top priority for building up the Chinese Army. Chennault made the case for increasing air operations against Japanese forces advancing in China. Roosevelt supported Chennault, authorizing an increase in airlift over “the Hump” to support Chennault’s operations. Arnold felt Stilwell never understood the B-29 campaign, and while admiring Chennault’s tactical acumen, he thought the Fourteenth Air Force commander underestimated the logistics required for air operations in the CBI Theater.

Further, Chennault recommended air attacks on Japanese shipping and air bases be given priority over bombing the Japanese homeland. Roosevelt attempted to have it both ways: “You are the doctor and I approve your treatment. Nevertheless, as a matter perhaps of sentimentality, I have had a hope that we could get at least one bombing expedition against Tokyo before the second anniversary of Doolittle’s flight. I really believe that the morale effect would help!”

This was characteristic of Roosevelt, who was not only proud of his role in the



B-29s, photographed through the nose of another Superfortress, bomb Japan in 1945.

Doolittle raid, but remained a strong public supporter of strategic bombing throughout the war. He frequently reiterated his desire to see the Axis powers bombed “heavily and relentlessly” and implored Marshall and Arnold to get B-29s into position to bomb Japan.

Arnold had long championed the development of the B-29 Superfortress, but the program was a huge, difficult gamble. In retrospect, Roosevelt’s support of Arnold during the perilous developmental and production cycles probably saved the bomber from failure.

The project endured over four years of engineering, testing, and production problems during which key officers in the Air Corps Materiel Division doubted the program would succeed. Brig. Gen. Kenneth B. Wolfe, who headed the program, stated, “Within the Air Force itself, there were certain people who didn’t think that we should spend our time and effort on a bomber that far advanced.”

Arnold, though, was absolutely determined to drive the airplane through to deployment. He insisted upon cutting developmental and procurement corners to accelerate production. Brig. Gen. Lauris Norstad, chief of staff of the Twentieth Air Force under Arnold, observed: “Arnold’s life was that B-29 and he was into every damn detail of it.”

In January 1943, at the Casablanca Conference, the President noted the great vulnerability of Japanese industry to air attack. The bombing of Japan, Roosevelt emphasized, would have “a tremendous morale effect on the Chinese people.”

Nonetheless, in 1943 and 1944, Arnold realized the B-29 program was in deep trouble; he relieved a number of top officers and responded with his “Air Plan for the Defeat of Japan,” presented at the Quadrant Conference in August 1943 at Quebec. The plan pleased Roosevelt, who

cabled British Prime Minister Winston Churchill: “We have under development a project whereby we can strike a heavy blow at our enemy in the Pacific ... with our new heavy bombers. This [is] a bold but entirely feasible project.”

Determined, if Not Obsessed

From time to time, Roosevelt showed his pique—especially evident in his frustration over delays in B-29 production. Roosevelt became frustrated when Arnold failed to meet self-imposed schedules of deploying B-29s to China, first by January and then by March 1944. The President admonished both Arnold and Marshall that “the worst thing is that we are falling down on our promises to China every single time.”

Arnold immediately began an all-out assault on the problems affecting B-29 deployment. He talked with Stimson and Hopkins; convinced the Joint Chiefs to assign top priority to the B-29 program; and activated XX Bomber Command, headed by Wolfe.

Arnold got attention at the highest levels of the War Department. Assistant Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson suggested Roosevelt sign an action memorandum to all officials involved in the program. Patterson stressed that B-29 production and deployment would “have a strong influence on the course of the war. No effort should be spared.”

Determined, even obsessed, to drive the B-29 program to success, Arnold suffered several heart attacks during the war, the last in January 1945 which almost killed him. Arnold realized that his reputation, if not his job, was on the line. Brig. Gen. Haywood S. Hansell Jr.,

who in late 1944 commanded the B-29s out of the Marianas, retrospectively observed: “The most courageous decision Arnold made was the acceptance of the B-29 before the damned thing had ever flown.” The ultimate success of the program has been described as an “unprecedented event in the history of industrial America.”

Arnold’s unflagging drive and persistence in restructuring the entire production program resulted in success in June 1944, with the B-29s being deployed to China in Operation Matterhorn.

This was followed by XXI Bomber Command’s B-29 campaign from the Marianas in the spring and summer of 1945, which collapsed Japan’s war production; imploded morale; pummeled Japan’s urban areas; and ended the Pacific war with the dropping of the atomic bombs. Thus, an invasion of the Japanese home islands—long planned and insisted upon by Marshall and MacArthur—proved unnecessary.

There is no doubt that had Roosevelt lived, he would have approved dropping atomic bombs on Japan, consistent with his policy of ending the Pacific war as soon as possible with the least loss of American lives. Throughout the war, the President remained fearful of a long, drawn-out island campaign in the Pacific. He stated that he wanted to avoid a campaign which “would take about 50 years before we got to Japan.”

Arnold had earned Roosevelt’s confidence, even admiration. Both leaders shared the trait of believing their subordinates could will themselves to accomplish much more, insisting they set their objectives much higher.

The President did not live to see the war’s end. FDR died on April 12, 1945, just weeks before Germany’s surrender and four months before Japan’s capitulation. Arnold was devastated: “Franklin Roosevelt was not only a personal friend, but one of the best friends the Air Force ever had. He had supported me in the development of the Air Force and in its global operations to an extent that I little dreamed of. ... Many times he seemed more like a fellow airman than he did the Commander in Chief.” ■

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