

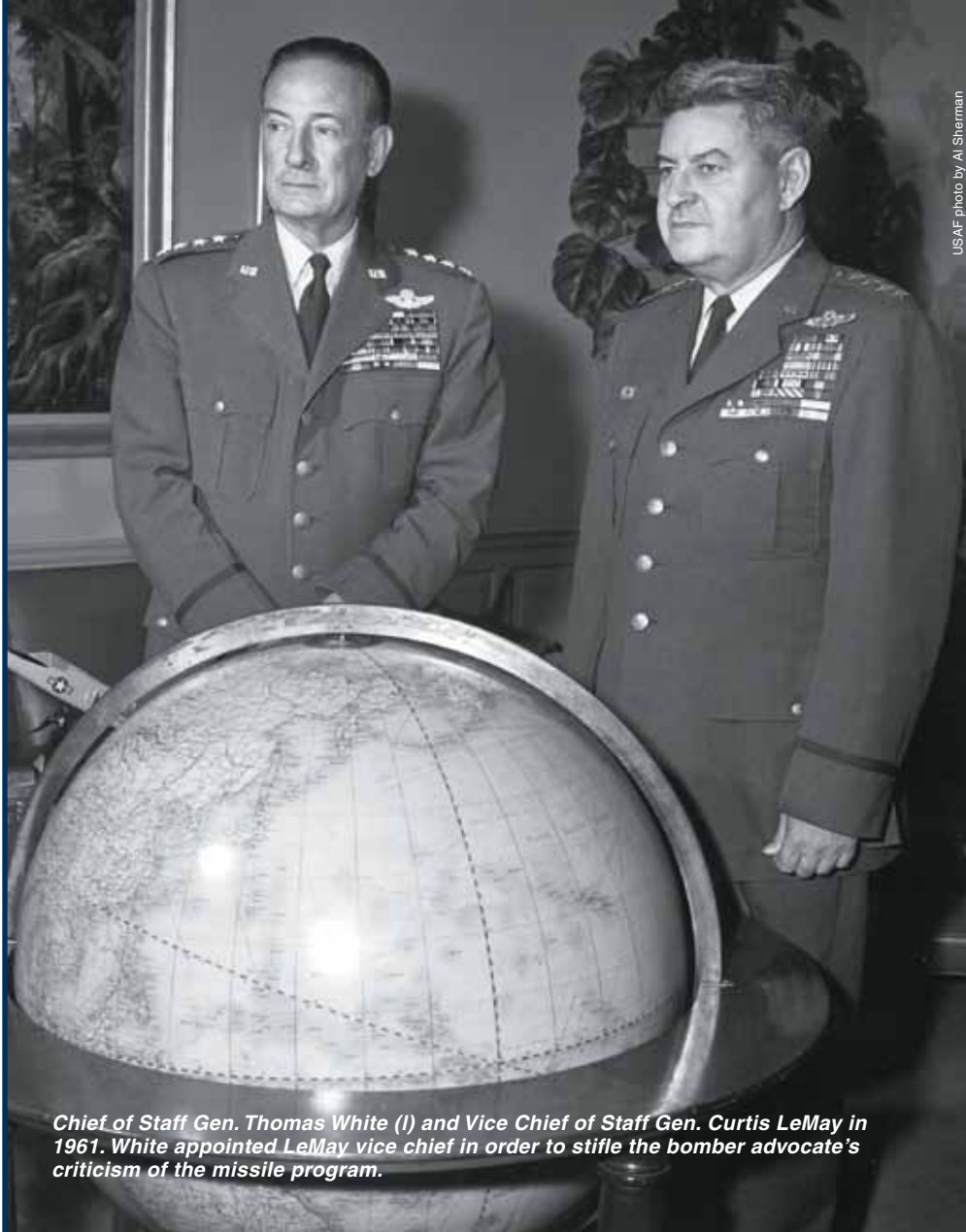
Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, who led Strategic Air Command from 1948 to 1957, considered America's first ICBM, the Atlas, an extravagant boondoggle that wouldn't perform as anticipated. It would achieve a "satisfactory state of reliability [only after] long and bitter experience in the field," he argued. Of course, LeMay consistently put ballistic missiles last among SAC funding priorities, meaning the Atlas wouldn't get a chance to gain the "long and bitter experience in the field" that he demanded.

Furthermore, LeMay disparaged ICBMs as mere "political and psychological weapons," insisting any money budgeted for them would be better spent on "penetration aids"—air-to-surface missiles—for his bombers.

In March 1953, Gen. Thomas S. Power, LeMay's deputy and successor at SAC, outlined his boss's resolute stance in a letter to USAF's director of requirements.

"Regardless of the missile program," Power wrote, "it is the opinion of this headquarters that the continued advance in the art of manned flight to high altitudes and long ranges should be at all times a priority objective of the Air Force's development program."

Gen. Thomas D. White, who became vice chief in June 1953, and later Chief of Staff from 1957 to 1961, vehemently disagreed. In May 1954, over LeMay's heated objection, White raised the ICBM to the top of USAF's research and development priority list. Over the next seven years—the remainder of White's time on



Chief of Staff Gen. Thomas White (l) and Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Curtis LeMay in 1961. White appointed LeMay vice chief in order to stifle the bomber advocate's criticism of the missile program.

USAF photo by Al Sherman

White vs. LeMay: The Battle Over Ballistic Missiles

By Lawrence J. Spinetta

Gen. Thomas White triumphed in an epic battle to develop and field the Atlas, overcoming fierce resistance from Gen. Curtis LeMay.



USAF photo

West Point, he learned Chinese, the first of seven foreign languages he mastered—and social graces. Importantly, it also honed his political savvy and led to high-visibility career opportunities.

After graduating from flying school in 1925, White spent just two years in an observation squadron before volunteering for duty in Peking, China. He seldom flew while stationed in Peking, though, because he had to travel to Mukden, China, or Manila in the Philippines to borrow an aircraft.

In 1934, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Douglas MacArthur picked White to accompany William C. Bullitt Jr., the first US ambassador to the Soviet Union, unaware of White's limited flying proficiency or that White, on his own initiative, had learned Russian. Bullitt had requested a handsome, dashing young man he could show off in diplomatic circles, and MacArthur thought White fit the bill.

The Soviets granted White their first civil pilot license but rarely allowed him to fly. Moreover, White's flying inexperience likely caused or contributed to an incident that cut short his assignment: While ferrying Bullitt from Moscow to Leningrad, he crashed. After getting lost and experiencing "engine difficulties"—perhaps from running out of gas—White made an emergency landing in a bog and the airplane cartwheeled. Muddy but uninjured, Bullitt wired President Franklin Roosevelt:

Gen. Thomas White holding an Atlas rocket model. White acknowledged that the strategic missile buildup may not be good for the traditional Air Force, but insisted it was good for the nation.

Active Duty—he and LeMay clashed over the direction of the Air Force. White prevailed, outmaneuvering LeMay to shepherd the Atlas into the inventory.

Tenuous Relations

LeMay and White weren't friends. Their strained relationship was rooted in starkly different careers and leadership styles.

One of the finest air commanders during World War II, LeMay was promoted at lightning speed, climbing from major to major general in three years. He unapologetically ordered his bombers to reduce Germany to rubble and firebomb Japan, often piloting the lead airplane on raids. As a result, LeMay earned a reputation for being, as Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara said, "extraordinarily belligerent" and "brutal."

LeMay's personal demeanor matched his philosophy of war. Warren Kozak, LeMay's biographer, described him as "dark, brooding, and forbidding. He rarely smiled, he spoke even less, and when he did, his few words seemed to come out in a snarl. Women seated next to him at dinner said he could sit through the entire meal and not utter a single syllable. Surly, tactless, and with a lifeless, moist cigar constantly locked between his teeth."

In sharp contrast to LeMay, White was suave and brilliant—a true renaissance man. At 18, White became one of the youngest graduates of West Point. His

peers described him as polished, well read, and gracious.

Whereas LeMay personified the Air Force operator, White was neither a talented field commander nor a strong aviator. He spent much of his early career as an attaché, a specialty where flying is secondary. Diplomatic service, however, played to his strengths: skill with languages—in his spare time at



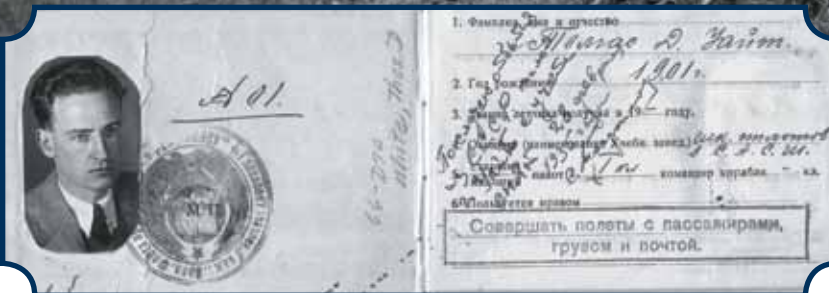
Boeing photo

Gen. Curtis LeMay (left seat), then SAC commander, and Boeing test pilot Tex Johnston (right seat) prepare to take a new Boeing tanker-transport aircraft on a test flight. The 707-based airframe would become the KC-135 tanker.



Above: White (left), as acting military attaché and pilot for Ambassador William Bullitt Jr. (second from right), once crash-landed with Bullitt aboard in a bog near Leningrad in the Soviet Union. Left: As a sign of respect, the Soviets issued White a pilot's license.

via Lawrence J. Spinetta



“We landed upside down but came out right side up. Trust none has reported to you that we are dead.”

The crash didn't hurt White's career. He was transferred to Rome, where he served as assistant attaché. In 1940, he was promoted and appointed attaché to Brazil. There he served for two years before being assigned staff duty, first at Third Air Force and later in intelligence.

In 1944, White was transferred to the Pacific. Unlike LeMay, he saw little combat. Instead, he spent much of his time fishing—a personal passion. Once, searching for a good fishing hole and apparently forgetting there was a war on, White wandered into an area where Japanese were hiding. Luckily, a young US soldier stopped and scolded him.

In 1948, White was appointed the Air Force's director of legislative liaison. Eugene M. Zuckert, then an assistant secretary and later Secretary of the Air Force, recalled White as “a sharp contrast to the usual World War II Air Force general. He was a deep and thoughtful individual. He impressed me more than any officer I had ever met. When he got that job, it became obvious that this man was a man of superior qualifications in an area where the Air Force was very, very poor.” White quickly earned a reputa-

tion among policy-makers for being articulate, statesman-like, gentlemanly, and humane—qualities that led to his selection as Chief of Staff over LeMay.

LeMay had, in fact, been the heir apparent to Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, the second Air Force Chief of Staff, but a series of unexpected events spoiled the succession plan.

In March 1950, Vandenberg's deputy, Gen. Muir S. Fairchild, died of a heart attack. Nathan F. Twining, who had planned to retire as a three-star, was appointed vice chief. He then became Chief after Vandenberg—suffering from prostate cancer—retired early.

Twining picked White instead of LeMay as his vice chief, a post White held for four years. When Twining was appointed Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1957, White moved up to become Chief. Newspapers appraised White's selection as the “dark horse choice.”

Losing out to White was particularly galling for LeMay, who let slip his disdain for attachés in his autobiography. In a backhanded attack on White, LeMay described how he rescued Power from attaché duty: “[Power] was being sent to England as an air attaché, for God's sake. Matter of fact, he already bought all of his stiff shirts, demanded

by protocol, to go to England. Well, I got him snaked out of that.”

LeMay eventually got his chance to run the Air Force, but the long wait undoubtedly aggravated the tenuous relations with White.

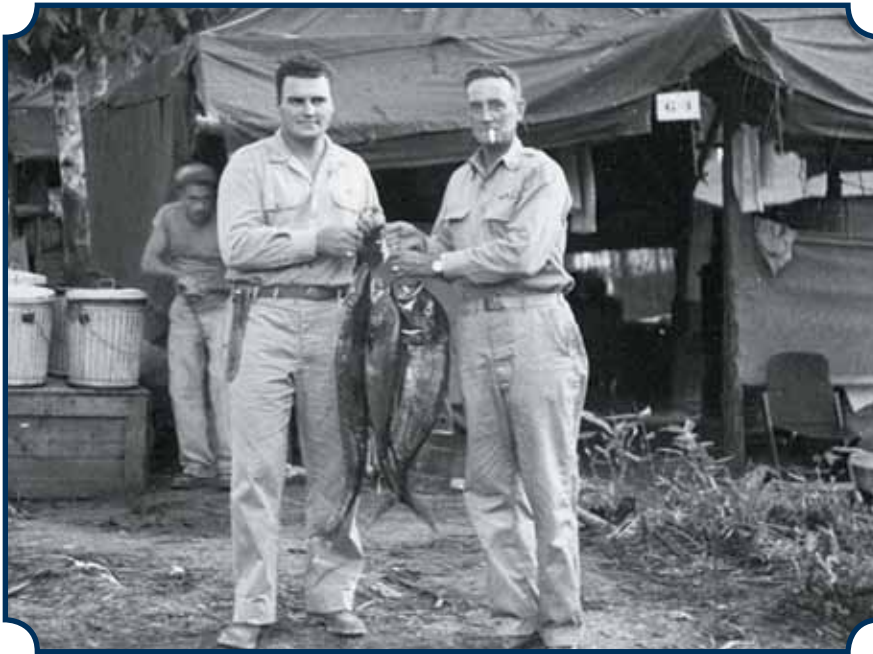
LeMay Leads Resistance

LeMay spent nearly 10 years at SAC. During that time, he built an empire.

In December 1948, LeMay convinced Vandenberg to assemble the USAF Senior Officer Board. At LeMay's urging, the board endorsed strategic bombing as the young service's primary mission, giving him a mandate to transform SAC. Under LeMay, SAC grew fourfold, from 51,985 personnel and 837 aircraft to more than 224,000 airmen—larger than the US Army in 1939—and 2,711 aircraft.

Not surprisingly, LeMay, whose professional success and identity were vested in the manned nuclear bomber, was unreceptive to developing a disruptive alternative. He fumed after learning of White's May 1954 directive that accelerated Atlas “to the maximum extent that technology would allow.”

In response, in June 1954, LeMay maneuvered Power, his protégé, into command of Air Research and Development Command (ARDC). His intent was to keep the organization out of the hands of missile enthusiasts.



White (r) displays a fine catch of fish at a base in the Pacific Theater during World War II. Unlike LeMay, White saw little action during his World War II tour.

In a brilliant counter, White, with Twining's support, ordered the creation of the Western Development Division (WDD), a semi-autonomous organization given responsibility for missile development. Although the WDD was nominally part of the ARDC, its funding was appropriated independently. Additionally, the WDD was granted contracting authority, so it was not beholden to the ARDC commander. Bernard A. Schriever, then a junior one-star, was put in charge.

Power objected to the Headquarters Air Force directive. In Neil Sheehan's book *A Fiery Peace in a Cold War* Power's reaction was described thus: "The whole arrangement was unfair. He was being instructed to create a separate ICBM organization out on the West Coast run by a general officer who was to have complete authority over every detail of the program. Yet the directive also made Power responsible for the ultimate outcome. In short, he was to be held responsible for what he could not control."

Before the WDD's establishment, the Air Force treated missiles no differently than any other weapon system. Air Force Letter 136-3, released in September 1952, asserted that missiles were not revolutionary weapons and did not deserve special treatment. In fact, the Air Force even designated missiles as "experimental bombers," and the Atlas was designated the XB-65.

Lt. Gen. Earle E. Partridge, Power's predecessor at ARDC, was one of the

few dissenters to this policy. Early in 1953, he wrote a memorandum to White challenging the assertion that the ICBM was not a revolutionary weapon and urged him to consider the fundamental change in national security that missiles would introduce.

Partridge forecast two divergent schools of thought within the Air Force. "One of these schools will be small but vigorous and will insist that the job can be done by the guided missile. The other group, representing the old fogies, will continue to insist that we adhere to the tried and proven aircraft."

White started to write a long response, but instead informed Partridge, "I tore up [my] reply to you. You have some very cogent points."

In November 1954, White declared that achieving initial operational capability was the immediate objective of the Atlas program, thus making production, not just R&D, the top priority.

An infuriated LeMay vowed, "These things will never be operational."

When Schriever went to brief LeMay, the SAC commander gave him a hostile and short reception. "What is the biggest warhead you can put on that missile?" challenged LeMay. "One megaton," answered Schriever. "When you can put something on that missile bigger than a f---ing firecracker, come and see me," LeMay retorted.

He used every opportunity to fan the embers of resistance among the bomber coterie, who occupied most of the service's top jobs. Increasingly frustrated,

White scolded his Air Staff, saying that ballistic missiles were here to stay—that they needed to realize this and get on with it.

LeMay ignored the reprimand and refused to divert money from bombers to missiles. He outlined his position in a 1955 memorandum: "It is my firm belief that the manned bomber must be the backbone of our offense for some time to come. ... Various missile programs should be re-examined to eliminate as many as is necessary to provide the funds for extension of our bomber capability."

The bomber was more than a weapon to LeMay. It was, in the words of one historian, "a fighting machine to which he was deeply wedded emotionally, an arm in which he had unshakable faith." Tellingly, LeMay devoted just three pages of his 572-page autobiography to missiles, and he used those three pages to justify the retention of nuclear bombers.

In June 1956, LeMay told Congress, "We believe that in the future the situation will remain the same as it has in the past, and that is a bomber force well-equipped, determined, well-trained, will penetrate any defense system that can be devised." He later proclaimed, "I think any force that has manned weapons systems at its disposal will certainly have the advantage over one that chose to go to an unmanned system."

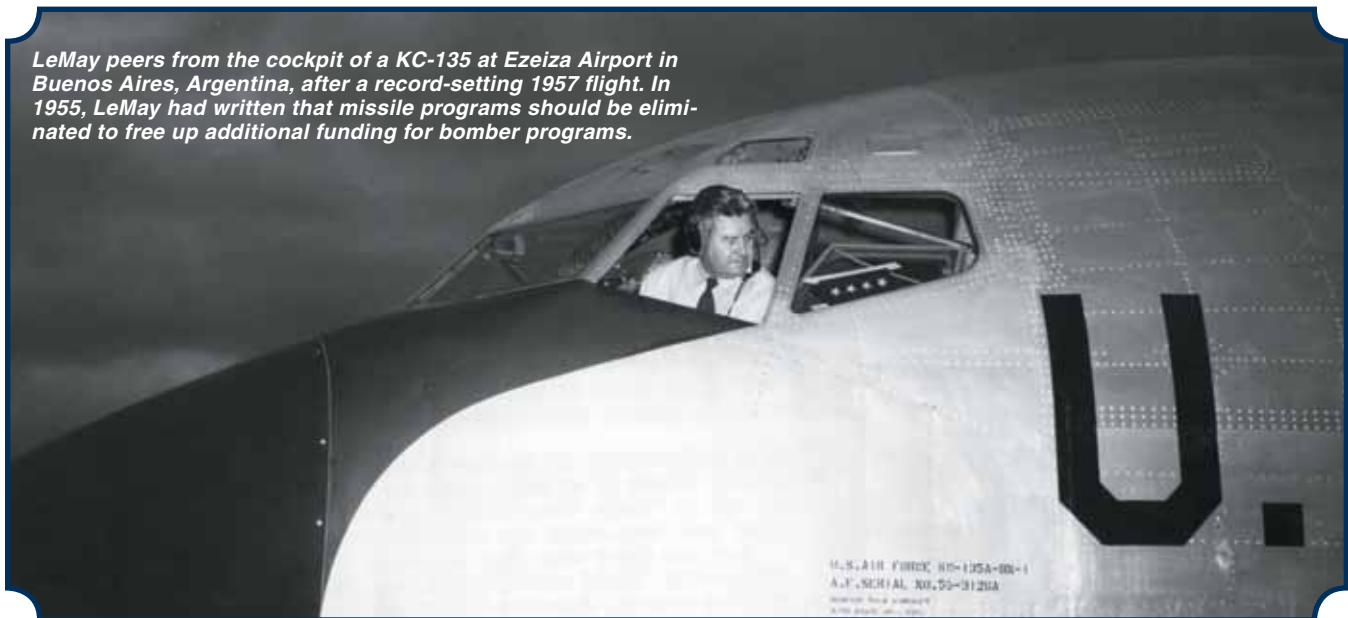
At wit's end, White complained in a speech to the Air War College in 1956: "We see too few examples of really creative, logical, farsighted thinking in the Air Force these days. It seems to me that our people are merely trying to find new ways of saying the same old things about airpower without considering whether they need changing to meet new situations and without considering the need for new approaches to new problems."

In June 1957, White convened a board of senior officers chaired by Lt. Gen. Donald Putt, the deputy chief of staff for development, to assess the prospects for integrating missiles into the service. Putt reported a lack of Air Force interest and understanding by most top-level officers.

Keep Your Enemies Closer

White struggled with how to control the obstreperous LeMay. He knew he didn't have the political power to force LeMay out, nor could he outwait his SAC chief. LeMay received his fourth star in 1951 at age 44, which made him the youngest four-star US general since Ulysses S. Grant. White—five years older

LeMay peers from the cockpit of a KC-135 at Ezeiza Airport in Buenos Aires, Argentina, after a record-setting 1957 flight. In 1955, LeMay had written that missile programs should be eliminated to free up additional funding for bomber programs.



than LeMay—had earned his fourth star in 1953, two years after LeMay.

However, when White was promoted to Chief of Staff in July 1957, he recognized an opportunity to stifle the bomber champion, appointing LeMay as his vice chief. As commander of SAC, a “specified command,” LeMay was his own boss, but as vice chief, LeMay answered to White.

The ploy was a Faustian bargain for White, because it virtually guaranteed LeMay would succeed White as Chief of Staff.

Nevertheless, the beauty of the maneuver was twofold: First, it capitalized on LeMay’s loyalty to chain of command, a tenet the general strictly enforced at SAC. Second, making LeMay vice chief followed a famous strategem attributed to Sun Tzu: Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer. As vice chief, LeMay not only worked for White, he was required to live next door at Fort Myer, Va.

With LeMay muzzled under his close supervision, White called a “come-to-Jesus meeting” with his commanders on Sept. 30, 1957, scolding them for their negative attitude toward missiles.

“The senior Air Force officer’s dedication to the airplane is deeply ingrained, and rightly so,” White argued, “but we must never permit this to result in a battleship attitude. We cannot afford to ignore the basic precept that all truths change with time.”

White told his subordinates that the Air Force should remain flexible and adopt superior technologies.

“With the advent of the guided missile, the US Air Force is in a critical era of its

existence. It is essential that we all pull together in the effort to properly utilize this family of new weapons systems for the defense of our nation.” He declared that the available funding would permit either the acquisition of the ICBM or a large bomber force, but not both.

White then outlined his missile credo, providing a new institutional vision. First, he declared, “According to current roles and missions, the Air Force has the greatest need for such weapons.” In a diplomatic preamble to his unpalatable bottom line, White said, “To preserve the required capability and flexibility of operations, it is essential that the Air Force maintain a significant force of manned aircraft during the foreseeable future.”

Then, however, with his audience mollified, White lowered the boom: ICBMs would displace bombers.

“As rapidly as missiles become operationally suitable, they will be phased into units either to completely or partially substitute for manned aircraft according to military requirements.”

On Oct. 4, 1957, less than a week after White held his commander’s conference, the Soviets successfully launched Sputnik atop the R-7, the world’s first ICBM. The United States managed to counter with a successful Atlas launch on Dec. 17, 1957.

In April 1958, anticipating the Atlas would shortly achieve IOC, White ordered the creation of a guided missile insignia. White specified that the badge could not include pilot wings of any kind.

In September 1959, the United States

deployed three Atlas missiles at Vandenberg AFB, Calif., providing the country with an “emergency” ICBM capability. Over the next three years, the Air Force fielded 11 operational Atlas squadrons. To prevent a stacked deck against the fledgling weapon system, White returned the brigadier general promotion list to LeMay with instructions to produce a more equitable distribution after observing it included a disproportional number of bomber pilots.

“Just What the Air Force Needed”

When White retired in 1961, *Air Force Magazine* observed, “It is both interesting and germane that General White never was a combat hero and that the qualities that made him ‘just what the Air Force needed’ are not those usually attributed to combat heroes.” The author continued, “It is not likely that another man with General White’s particular blend of talents ever again will be Chief of Staff.”

White’s nontraditional background made him more willing to discount the organizational costs of adopting the ICBM. He made the tough, unpopular decision even though it irritated many men in Air Force blue, because he was convinced that embracing the ICBM was imperative for national security. Indeed, he remembered “telling the Air Staff on many occasions that the buildup in strategic missiles ... was not good for the traditional Air Force but it was vital for the nation.” ■

Air Force Lt. Col. Lawrence J. Spinetta is an F-15 pilot with RPA command experience. He currently serves on the Joint Staff. His previous article for Air Force Magazine, “Sinking Ships,” appeared in July 2006.