



LeMay: The Life and Wars of General Curtis LeMay

By Warren Kozak

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The firebombing of Tokyo. Strategic Air Command. John F. Kennedy. Dr. Strangelove. George Wallace. All of these have one man in common - General Curtis LeMay, who remains as enigmatic and controversial as he was in life. Until now. Warren Kozak traces the trajectory of America's most infamous general, from his firebombing of Tokyo, guardianship of the U.S. Nuclear arsenal in the Cold War, frustrated career in government and short lived political run. Curtis LeMay's life spanned an epoch in American military history, from the small U.S. army air corps of the interwar years to the nuclear age.

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LeMay: The Life and Wars of General Curtis LeMay By Warren Kozak Bibliography

- Rank: #302278 in Books
- Published on: 2009-05-11
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 1.46" h x 7.00" w x 8.61" l, 1.53 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 434 pages

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

Kozak's biography of U.S. Air Force General Curtis E. LeMay (1906–1990) won't convert those utterly convinced that he was a bomb-happy maniac. The more open-minded, however, will find in it a broader perspective on this controversial officer than we have had elsewhere. His outstanding competence as leader and organizer of strategic airpower in World War II and during the cold war is convincingly presented; so are his limitations in the Pentagon and his poor judgment in being George Wallace's running mate in 1968. Kozak suggests that LeMay was utterly dedicated to the mission of destroying his country's enemies and to the men under his command charged with carrying out that mission. This led to what can only be called a certain lack of the social graces and a good many of what might charitably be called misinterpretations of where LeMay's patriotism led him. A book that definitely belongs in aviation and modern military history collections. --Roland Green

Review

New biography of a dynamic military innovator focuses on his famously flawed personality.

With the ousting of General David McKiernan, America's top commander in Afghanistan, hijacking headlines, the topic of military innovation (or lack thereof) bears fresh consideration for a nation forced to rethink its approach to an unconventional battle. Let's face it: Some generals are simply more strategically creative (and therefore more effective) than others. Historically, one of America's most dynamic military innovators was Curtis LeMay, the World War II Air Commander heralded as the father of modern strategic bombing (he's credited with orchestrating the firebombing of Tokyo and crippling Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia with devastating aerial assaults). Warren Kozak's new biography on LeMay outlines the enigmatic air general's personal and military development--traced all the way back to childhood--with an unprecedented focus on his famously flawed personality. --The Daily Beast, May 26, 2009

Warren Kozak's new biography is not meant to hide LeMay's abrasiveness and absence of tact. And he does not claim that his revisionist account is the last word about the controversial general, or that he has unearthed radically new information. Rather, Kozak's achievement in this engaging portrait is to have provided a twofold reminder. First, like him or not, Curtis LeMay's brilliance and expertise saved thousands of American lives during World War II, helped to shorten the war, and then restored the American strategic deterrence that was essential in keeping the peace during the Cold War.

Second, the larger LeMay paradox is an old one in American military history: peace-loving democratic peoples fear fiery warriors in times of calm as much as they clamor for them in extremis. Those whom we applaud in wartime, we usually damn later during peace. So it was with LeMay, who graced the cover of *Time* magazine and, by the end of World War II, was a national icon....

Kozak does a good job of uncovering the studious and thoroughly professional side of LeMay, one that belies his image as an out-of-control saber-rattler. Even before World War II, he was a flight engineer and an astute navigator, pioneering long-range navigation techniques on the new B-17 bomber.

LeMay was the longest-serving general in our history, and the youngest to reach four-star rank. President Kennedy was no fan of LeMay, but astutely appointed him to the Joint Chiefs, remarking, "I like having LeMay at the head of the Air Force. Everybody knows how he feels. That's a good thing right now." And

even LeMay's perennial liberal foe, Robert McNamara, once concluded that Lemay -- his former wartime boss -- was "the finest military strategist the nation has ever produced."

What are we left with, then, in assessing Curtis E. LeMay? Kozak suggests a tragedy of sorts. LeMay grew up in an age when public-relations ability was largely irrelevant in comparison with personal courage and proven expertise. LeMay's approach -- a combination of reticence and occasional blunt talk about victory at any cost -- privileged action over rhetoric; it was perfectly suited for the conventional struggle of World War II, and even to the frightening, but far more complex, early years of the Cold War....

Yet LeMay's competence and honesty were never questioned. He did not cash in -- as so many have since -- by hawking superfluous new weaponry to former subordinates in the Pentagon. LeMay would rather have perished than have changed to facilitate new doctrines of limited war and faith in international peace-keeping organizations. In this sympathetic biography, Warren Kozak lets facts about LeMay speak for themselves and reminds us why one of our greatest soldiers is today hardly recognized.

In short, the LeMay DNA was almost divinely engineered for America's ordeal between 1930 and 1960. When that era passed -- and passed without Armageddon, thanks, in large part, to a few brilliant and courageous warriors like LeMay -- we were to be done with him as well. --National Review, Victor Davis Hanson

Review

Like most Americans, I had no idea what a significant man Lemay was in 20th century aviation and warfare. This book also serves as a mini case study in management techniques because Lemay was masterful in building large organizations, fostering open dialog and earning the trust of those he commanded. I highly recommend this book.

Users Review

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Helen Turner:

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