Strategic Air Command

The Army Air Forces (AAF), within the U.S. Army, had become an almost autonomous military arm by the close of World War II. The AAF represented the powerful changes that were coming about as air warfare dominated the strategies and defenses of nations at mid-century. The Continental Air Forces, created in December 1944, coordinated the activities of the four numbered air forces (First, Second, Third, and Fourth) in the United States. Strategic bombardment operations during World War II, however, had shown the need for a major command devoted exclusively to strategic, long-range air combat operations, and that became the command's assigned mission in 1946.

In 1945, World War II was over, the nuclear age was upon us, and a Cold War would soon develop between the United States and Soviet Union. Continental Air Forces was redesignated Strategic Air Command (SAC) on 21 March 1946. The US Air Force's Strategic Air Command with its bomber force symbolized the cornerstone of national strategic policy: deterrence against the growing nuclear arsenal of the Soviet Union.

Headquarters Strategic Air Command, initially located at Andrews Air Force Base MD, moved to Offutt Air Force Base, Neb., in November 1948. Air Force Secretary Stuart Symington chose to locate the Air Force's crucial long-range atomic strike force at Offutt primarily because the base was centrally located on the North American continent, placing it well beyond the existing range of potentially hostile bombers or missiles.

In 1948 General Curtis E. LeMay assumed command of the newly formed Strategic Air Command, and established its headquarters at Offutt Air Force Base, Neb. This central location was to become the nerve center of a worldwide bomber-missile force. The general built, from the remnants of World War II, an all jet bomber force, manned and supported by professional airmen dedicated to the preservation of peace. The general commanded SAC for nearly 10 years, and under his leadership and supervision, plans were laid for the development and integration of an intercontinental ballistic missile capability. In July 1957 General LeMay was appointed vice chief of staff of the United States Air Force and served in that capacity until July 1961, at which time he was appointed chief of staff.

The USSR's detonation of an atomic bomb in 1949 accentuated the importance of long range bombers, such as the Air Force's giant B-36 Peacemaker, and modern air defenses.

The Soviet-backed invasion of South Korea by communist North Korea in June 1950 drew the USAF into a brutal 3-year conflict. The war ended in 1953 after an armistice with China and North Korea, but the Air Force kept a large number of units stationed in the Pacific to help contain communism. It also began a massive buildup of the forward-based US Air Forces in Europe, from England to Turkey. USAF units provided the cornerstone of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) capabilities against the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact for the next four decades.

At the outset of the 1950s, SAC was only at the threshold of its Cold War buildup. Invention of the powerful hydrogen bomb and the promise of long range rockets accelerated the arms race between the superpowers in the 1950s. With the end of the fighting in Korea, President Eisenhower, who had taken office in January 1953, called for a "New Look" at national defense. The result of this reexamination was a greater reliance on nuclear weapons and air power to deter war. Instead of maintaining the large Army and Navy that had fought the Korean War, the Eisenhower administration chose to invest in air power, especially in the Strategic Air Command (SAC). Key elements of the New Look--a reliance of America's lead in nuclear weapons; an emphasis on air power, especially on strategic forces; support of NATO; and a strong nuclear deterrent--were already a part of the national strategy. The Eisenhower administration's particular contribution lay in the doctrine of "massive retaliation," the threat that the United States might not limit its response to future aggression as it had in Korea. This was a matter of making the underlying deterrent threat more explicit to potential adversaries.

In choosing this New Look, deterrence-oriented military policy, Eisenhower challenged the Air Force to make it work, and the Air Force stood ready. Since taking over SAC in 1948, General Curtis E. LeMay had converted it from a training organization to a combat force immediately ready to retaliate against an aggressor. SAC's first bombers were primarily World War II B-29s, with the B-50 and B-36 arriving in the SAC inventory during 1948 and 1949. By the end of 1953 SAC had achieved an unprecedented level of striking power. Of the seventeen wings in the atomic force, eleven were equipped. The B-47 force had grown during the year from 62 to 329 planes, the B-36 force reached 185, and the reconnaissance RB-36 component numbered 137. Supporting the bomber force were more than 500 tankers and 200 fighters. In 1950 SAC had about 1,000 total aircraft—a figure that would triple by 1959, paralleling an increase in personnel strength from 85,000 to 262,000.

Early in the 1950s, SAC developed a reflex operation between its southern bases and Morocco, with B-36 and B-47 wings rotating to North Africa for extended temporary duty. During the middle and late 1950s, SAC adopted a dispersal program—spreading out its potential as a Soviet target by placing its aircraft, weapons, and personnel on many more bases, with each bombardment wing having two additional installations to which it could disperse. A ring of overseas air bases from Greenland to North Africa projected American nuclear might to within striking distance of the Soviet heartland. Personnel strength stood at nearly 160,000, based at twenty-nine bases in the states and ten overseas.

During 1954-1956, SAC significantly enhanced its posture in reaction to the changing world dynamic. SAC initiated construction of an underground, hardened command center at its Offutt headquarters in 1954, with completion in 1956.

Following the Soviet launching of its Sputnik satellite in late October 1957, SAC announced activation of formal operational alert crews. Initially, SAC placed 11 percent of its 1,528 bombers and 766 tankers on alert, thus readying approximately 170 bombers and 84 tankers. SAC reached a 20 percent readiness in 1959, attaining the 33 percent goal in 1960. SAC alerts were 24-hour, with precise requirements for ever-faster takeoffs dependent on the type of scenario in test. In March 1961 President Kennedy requested funding to increase the number of SAC aircraft on 15-minute ground alert from one-third to one-half the total force. The B-47 phase-out was accelerated to provide the aircrews needed to support the higher alert rate of B-47 and B-52 bomber forces, which was attained by July 1961.

Strategic Air Command (SAC) became the preeminent instrument of American defense strategy. Standing continuous alert for the rest of the Cold War, SAC's arsenal of bombers, such as the long-range B-52 Stratrofortress, was joined in the 1960s by intercontinental ballistic missiles, such as the Titan and Minuteman. Together with the Navy's missile-launching submarines, these powerful weapons comprised America's nuclear deterrent "triad." With the development of launch vehicles and orbital satellites, the Air Force mission also expanded into space.

The airborne alert operation nicknamed Chrome Dome was a realistic training mission designed to deter enemy forces from a surprise attack on the United States. Demonstrating the Strategic Air Command’s nearly immediate retaliatory capability, units flew fully combat-configured bombers along routes that covered parts of Western Europe and North Africa. Under the name Hard Head VI, units flew similar airborne alert operations which were designed to monitor the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System located at Thule, Greenland. SAC wings launched two combat-ready B-52s every 20-23 hours for the duration of the 30-60 day operation. To keep the B-52s airborne for long periods, refue ling squadron also performed a number of air refueling missions. These annual operations lasted for five years in the early 1960s.

Of course, the figures did not tell the whole story. Indeed the numbers that indicated the precise ability of the command to deliver a decisive blow were often preserved in the strictest secrecy, but LeMay’s achievement in building a combat-ready force with a high state of discipline was open knowledge. The nation’s reliance on SAC bombers to prevent war through the threat of nuclear devastation served to justify the organization’s motto: Peace Is Our Profession. The prestige of the Strategic Air Command bespoke assurance that whatever the numbers of personnel and aircraft, if determination and training could deliver the atomic blow, the threat of atomic retaliation was real. The deterrent force was in this sense beyond question.

SAC made its presence visible and known. SAC told the world—certainly the Soviet Union—about itself. Three times Hollywood made SAC and Curtis LeMay the subject of

widely popular films. In 1954, Strategic Air Command, with actor James Stewart, showcased the B-36 and the B-47. In 1962, A Gathering of Eagles, starring actor Rock Hudson, depicted SAC alerts, using the molehole and alert apron at Beale Air Force Base in Northern California. And in 1964, director Stanley Kubrick made Dr. Strangelove, based on a SAC-gone-awry portrait in a British novel titled Red Alert (of 1958). Even the popular writer Tom Clancy would comment in The Sum of All Fears of 1991 that SAC's second generation underground command center at Offutt Air Force Base—also designed by Leo A. Daly, in 1984-1989—was commissioned not to replace an obsolete 30-year old center of the middle 1950s, but because SAC needed to match the imagery of Hollywood.

During the later 1950s and into the 1960s the dynamics of the Cold War altered dramatically with the advent of deployable ICBMs. As these unmanned nuclear weapons became more reliable, of greater range, and smaller, military planning evolved accordingly. SAC activated the first Thor intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) and Atlas ICBMs at Vandenberg Air Force Base in Southern California in 1958. The next year, SAC undertook Project Big Star, planning rail-mobile deployment for the Minuteman I ICBM, then still in research and testing. Each of the IRBM and ICBM programs required large-scale infrastructure, with ancillary support, particularly checkout and assembly buildings. First emplacements of Atlas and Titan ICBMs governed dynamics into the middle 1960s, followed by emplacements of the Minuteman I series. Command and control facilities for squadrons of missile silos were hardened underground and manned. Following the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, the ost-Attack Command and Control System (PACCS) augmented the SAC Looking Glass airborne command and control unit at Offutt Air Force Base that had been initiated in 1960. A National Emergency Airborne Command Post (NEACP) also went in place at Andrews Air Force Base near Washington, D.C., and SAC dispersed three support squadrons to Westover (Massachusetts), Barksdale (Louisiana), and March (California). PACCS used modified KC-135s capable of carrying personnel, cargo, and intelligence platforms.

Possession of strong strategic forces helped the United States prevail in crises provoked by Soviet probes in Berlin and Cuba during the early 1960s. Communist expansion in Southeast Asia posed new and difficult challenges. In 1964 the United States began full-scale military operations on the side of South Vietnam, and in 1965 launched Operation Rolling Thunder against targets in North Vietnam. With the use of air power constrained for political reasons, both Air Force and Naval Aviation had to support a protracted and unpopular counter-insurgency effort against a determined and elusive foe. Tactical aircraft, such as the versatile F-4 Phantom II, performed in a wide variety of roles from aerial combat to close air support, the F-105 Thunderchief specialized in bombing raids against North Vietnam, while SAC B-52s "carpet bombed" remote jungle strongholds. Not until the Linebacker Operations of 1972 was air power brought fully to bear against North Vietnamese forces and facilities.

On June 1, 1992, with the Berlin Wall down, the Warsaw Pact a memory and the Soviet Union nonexistent, SAC and the JSTPS also took their place in the history books of the Cold War. That same day, U.S. Strategic Command was established.