THE GENERAL AND WORLD WAR III

Curtis LeMay believed that the only sure nuclear defense was to launch a preëmptive first strike. During the Cuban missile crisis, he almost did it.

BY RICHARD RHODES

IN 1945, the Air Force sent a thirty-eight-year-old major general named Curtis LeMay to the Pacific to direct its ineffectual air war against Japan, where the newly discovered jet stream was playing havoc with high-altitude precision bombing. The *New Yorker* reporter St. Clair McKelway, who was serving as a public-relations officer on Guam, described the General's arrival in these pages: "He was around a few days, said almost nothing to anybody, was what, by civilian standards, would be called rude to many people. He was a big, husky, healthy, rather stocky, full-faced, black-haired man." He chewed a cigar stub to disguise the Bell's palsy that he'd got from flying high and cold; it made one side of his lower lip droop. He spoke, McKelway wrote, "through teeth that had obviously been pried open only with effort, an effort with which the speaker had no real sympathy." He was a warrior as hard as Ulysses S. Grant, a bomber pilot, a big-game hunter: dark, fleshy, smart. "I'll tell you what war is about," he once said with characteristic bluntness. "You've got to kill people, and when you've killed enough they stop fighting."

LeMay studied the mission reports and reconnaissance photographs, realized that the Japanese had almost no air defense left, and sent three hundred and twenty-five planes loaded with jellied-gasoline firebomb clusters over Tokyo in the early hours of March 10, 1945. "You're going to deliver the biggest firecracker the Japanese have ever seen," he told his crews. As he waited impatiently for the bombers to return, he confided to McKelway, "In a war, you've got to try to keep at least one punch ahead of the other guy all the time. A war is a very tough kind of proposition. If you don't get the enemy, he gets you. I think we've figured out a punch he's not expecting this time."

The mission succeeded: the United States Strategic Bombing Survey estimated that "probably more persons lost their lives by fire at Tokyo in a 6-hour period than at any time in the history of man." LeMay's subsequent mission report emphasized that the object of the attack "was *not* to bomb indiscriminately civilian populations." But the destruction that first windy night was in fact indiscriminate to the point of atroc-

LeMay in 1954: "We'd have been a hell of a lot better off if we'd got World War III started in those days."

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ity, as LeMay himself understood: nearly seventeen square miles of the Japanese capital burned to the ground, with at least a hundred thousand people killed and hundreds of thousands injured. "CONGRATULATIONS," LeMay's boss, Air Force Chief of Staff Henry A. (Hap) Arnold, telexed him from Washington. "THIS MISSION SHOWS YOUR CREWS HAVE GOT THE GUTS FOR ANYTHING." LeMay laid on firebombings night after night until the end of the war, by which time sixty-three Japanese cities had been totally or partially burned out and more than a million Japanese civilians killed. Hiroshima and Nagasaki survived to be atomic-bombed only because Washington had removed them from Curtis LeMay's target list. Years later, he told a cadet who asked how much "moral considerations" had affected his decisions, "I suppose if I had lost the war, I would have been tried as a war criminal. Fortunately, we were on the winning side."

Three months after Hiroshima, LeMay gave a speech to the Ohio Society of New York. The next war, he warned, would be fought with fantastic new weapons—a war of "rockets, radar, jet propulsion, television-guided missiles, speeds faster than sound and atomic power." It would be an air war. Before the next war, he insisted, "the air force must be allowed to develop unhindered and unchained. There must be no ceiling, no boundaries, no limitations to our air power development."

Then LeMay came to a contradiction that he would chew over for years to come. First, he offered one of his touchstone concepts: "No air attack, once it is launched, can be completely stopped." That meant to LeMay that the United States would have to have an air force "in being" that could move immediately to retaliate if the country was attacked. The preparation for retaliation, the threat of it, might be sufficient to prevent attack in the first place. "If we are prepared it may never come. It is not immediately conceivable that any nation will dare to attack us if we are prepared." So in November of 1945 LeMay was already thinking in terms of what came to be called deterrence. But therein lay the contradiction: If no air attack could be completely stopped, then retaliation would not protect the country—it would only destroy the enemy's country in turn.

Before the invention of nuclear weapons, wars had been built by hand, so to speak, one engagement after another, until one side felt itself sufficiently damaged to capitulate. Nuclear weapons, encapsulating enormous violence in small, portable mechanisms, changed those conditions, making it possible for warring powers to deliver unacceptable damage immediately and mutually. The consequences of this revolution in the terms of war were not immediately obvious to American military and civilian leaders, though they seem to have been obvious to the Soviets. Working out how the rules had changed took time. In the four years that the United States held a monopoly on nuclear weapons, it reduced its military forces to bare bones, shrank the defense budget from its wartime high of nearly ninety billion dollars to less than fifteen billion dollars, and counted on a small but growing nuclear arsenal to deter a Soviet march to the Atlantic across a war-ravaged Western Europe.

The panic within the U.S. government when the Soviets tested their first atomic bomb, in 1949, followed from the realization that nuclear deterrence would soon be mutual, leaving the Communist enemy with superior conventional forces (which is why the U.S. rushed to invent a new unique capability, the hydrogen bomb). At that point, LeMay and his military colleagues began to think of the U.S. nuclear arsenal as a "wasting asset," and to consider ways that arsenal might be used before it was lost to mutual deterrence. Presidents from Truman and Eisenhower onward made it clear privately, if not always publicly, that they did not believe either nuclear superpower would dare start a war, but LeMay and other military leaders were responsible for fighting such a war, if it came. Like it or not, they had to think about how it might be fought, and they concluded it could only be fought if the United States struck first. But an explicit Presidential order denied them that option. The order did not always stop LeMay. As commander of the Strategic Air Command in the early nineteen-fifties, he found himself in a nuclear double bind—the political and the military interpretations of the new age simply could not be reconciled. During the Cuban missile crisis, the determination of LeMay and some of his subordinates to follow military logic, subverting Presidential authority to do so, nearly led to full-scale nuclear war with the Soviet Union. The United States came much closer to self-inflicted nuclear destruction at that time than most Americans realize.

THE Strategic Air Command was created in March, 1946, as the United States' atomic striking force. Its immediate purpose was to counter Soviet ambitions in Europe. By the time LeMay took it over, three years after the end of the war, the Soviets were actively probing U.S. intentions in Berlin and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, as LeMay quickly realized, the force was far from combat ready.

"Everybody thought they were doing fine," the new SAC commander recalled in retirement. "The first thing to do was convince them otherwise." In January of 1949, LeMay ordered a maximum-effort mission against Wright Field, in Dayton, Ohio—"a realistic combat mission, at combat altitudes, for every airplane in SAC that we could get into the air." Since Air Force intelligence could supply only vintage prewar photographs of Soviet cities, LeMay gave his crews 1938 photographs of Dayton. He instructed them to bomb by radar from thirty thousand feet, instead of the lackadaisical fifteen thousand feet they had adopted for practice. "Nobody seemed to know what life was like upstairs," he recalled in his autobiography. Not many crews even found Dayton. For those who did, bombing scores ran from one to two miles off target—distances at which even Nagasaki-yield atomic bombs would do only marginal damage. LeMay called the results of the Dayton exercise "just about the darkest night in American military aviation history. Not one airplane finished that mission as briefed. *Not one.*"

He decided that his goal was "to build a force so professional, so powerful that we would not have to fight. In other words, we had to build a deterrent

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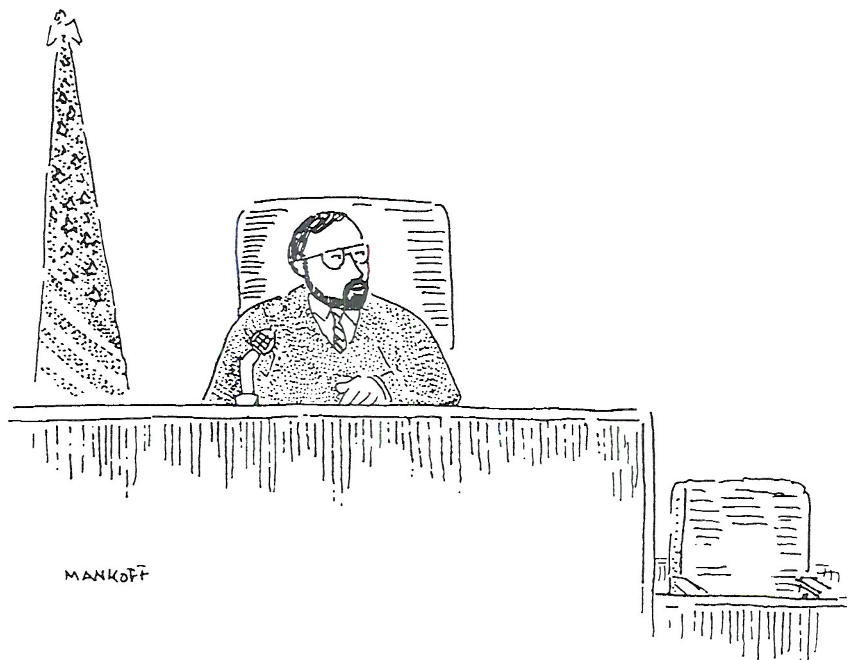
force." But as LeMay began turning SAC around, he had to face the mortal question he had skirted in his speech to the Ohio Society. Despite the poor performance over Dayton, atomic bombs made hitting the target right the first time far more probable than ordinary high explosives had allowed. Given a "war aim of complete subjugation of the enemy," the Air Force War Plans Division had recently concluded, "it would be feasible to risk an all-out atomic attack at the beginning of a war in an effort to stun the enemy into submission." So when LeMay took his ideas for a SAC war plan to his superiors in the Air Force, he proposed that "the primary mission of SAC should be to establish a force in being capable of dropping 80% of the stockpile in one mission." By then he was confident, he assured them, that "the next war will be primarily a strategic air war and the atomic attack should be laid down in a matter of hours." The Air Force agreed: the plan that resulted entailed destroying seventy Soviet cities in thirty days with a hundred and thirty-three atomic bombs, causing up to 2.7 million deaths and another four million casualties. American air-power strategists had a name for such an attack as LeMay was proposing: "killing a nation."

In the spring of 1953, a committee headed by retired Air Force General James Doolittle proposed giving the Russians a two-year deadline to come to terms and attacking them if they failed to do so (thus using the wasting asset to force a decision). The following year, President Eisenhower rejected this bizarre nuclear ultimatum and issued an updated Basic National Security Policy statement: "The United States and its allies must reject the concept of preventive war or acts intended to provoke war."

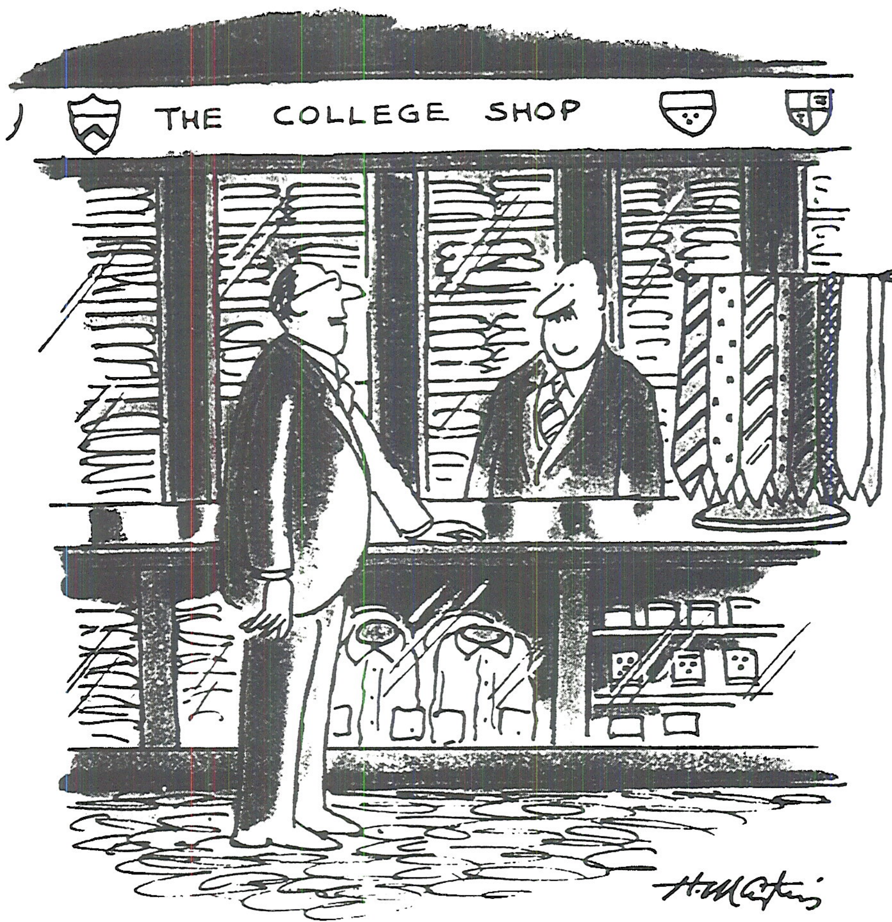
At the outset of the Korean War, in 1950, LeMay had asked the Pentagon, as he said later, to "turn SAC loose with incendiaries" on North Korea; Truman's advisers had rejected such a blitzkrieg of mass destruction. SAC was ultimately authorized to bomb urban and rural North Korea anyway, piecemeal, and carried out its assignment brutally, burning out cities and breaking big agricultural dams, scouring out entire valleys of peasant villages and rice paddies as far as twenty-seven miles downstream, spreading the agony across the years of war. More than two million North Korean civilians died in that campaign, a little-known toll comparable to civilian losses in Japan during the Second World War. "Over a period of three years or so," LeMay remembered, "we killed off—what—twenty percent of the population of [North] Korea. . . . This seemed to be acceptable to everybody; but to kill a few people at the start right away, no, we can't seem to stomach that." Such inconsistencies further undermined LeMay's trust in Presidential decisiveness. If deterrence had to be his formal strategy, he would also prepare darker strategies against the hazard that deterrence might fail.

Since *preventive* war was not an available remedy to the enlarging Soviet capacity for a first strike, SAC was authorized to plan for *preëmption*—for beating the Soviet forces to the punch if intelligence indicated they were beginning a first strike. The C.I.A. estimated that the Soviet Union would need a month to assemble and deliver its small stock of nuclear weapons. The Joint Chiefs ordered SAC to assign highest priority to a "blunting mission" that would take out Soviet airfields first upon Presidential determination that a Soviet attack had begun, followed by attacks on advancing Soviet troops, followed finally by attacks on cities and government control centers.

LeMay had no interest in dribbling out his forces on three disparate missions. The Soviets might need a month in 1954 to deliver their arsenal of about a hundred and fifty atomic bombs; his thousand and eight bomber crews, once deployed, could deliver as many as seven hundred and fifty bombs in a few hours. The SAC commander continued to believe obstinately that the most effective attack would be his "Sunday punch": simultaneous assault from all sides with everything in the stockpile. According to documents analyzed in *International Security* by the defense consultant David Alan Rosenberg, Captain William Brigham Moore, a Navy officer, attended a SAC standard briefing on March 15, 1954, kept notes, and came away appalled: "The final impression was that virtually all of Russia would be nothing but a smoking, radiating ruin at the end of two hours." During the post-briefing question period, someone asked LeMay what course he would advocate if hostilities were renewed in Korea—by then at truce. He answered that he would drop a few bombs in China, Manchuria, and southeastern Russia. "In those 'poker games,'" the Navy captain quotes LeMay, "such as Korea and Indo-China [where the French were then engaged], we . . . have never raised the ante—we have always just



"Lady and gentleman of the jury, have you reached your verdict?"



"Chest 42, waist 38, inseam 33, Princeton '48."

• •

called the bet. We ought to try raising sometime."

By 1954, Curtis LeMay had apparently begun raising the ante with the Soviet Union on his own, covertly and extralegally. Reconnaissance overflights of the Soviet Union had begun no later than 1950. LeMay used these flights not only to gather electronic and photographic intelligence; he also used them to probe Soviet air defenses, knowing as he did so that he might be provoking war. There is testimony that he may have meant to do just that. If he could not initiate preventive war, he seems to have concluded, he might be able to push the Soviets to sufficiently high levels of alert to justify launching a full preëmptive attack. He linked reconnaissance with provocation in an interview after he retired:

> There was a time in the 1950s when we could have won a war against Russia. It would have cost us essentially the accident rate of the flying time, because their defenses were pretty weak. One time in the 1950s we flew all of the reconnaissance aircraft that SAC possessed over Vladivostok at high noon. Two reconnaissance airplanes saw MiGs, but there were no interceptions made. It was well planned, too—crisscrossing paths of all the reconnaissance airplanes. Each target was hit by at least two, and usually three, reconnaissance airplanes to make sure we got pictures of it. We practically mapped the place up there with no resistance at all. We could have launched bombing attacks, planned and executed just as well, at that time.

Soviet defense forces had no way of knowing if LeMay's crisscrossing reconnaissance aircraft carried nuclear weapons or not. If Soviet aircraft had crisscrossed American cities under similar circumstances, SAC would certainly have preëmpted. The Soviets hunkered down, because they had no adequate response, but their lack of defenses predictably emboldened LeMay.

In 1954, LeMay remarked to a reconnaissance pilot whose plane had been damaged by a MiG-17 while over the Soviet Union, "Well, maybe if we do this overflight right, we can get World War III started." The pilot, Hal Austin, told the documentary filmmaker Paul Lashmar that he assumed LeMay was joking, but years later, after LeMay retired, Austin saw him again and "brought up the subject of the mission we had flown. And he remembered it like it was yesterday. We chatted about it a little bit. His comment again was, 'Well, we'd have been a hell of a lot better off if we'd got World War III started in those days.' "

Was LeMay joking? The best evidence that he was not is his own testimony, in a lecture he delivered to the National War College, in April, 1956. Decisive victory in a nuclear war, he emphasized on that occasion, would have been reached "in the first few days" of battle. The Soviet Union was not yet capable of achieving such a decisive nuclear victory, but it was "building a global bombing force with aircraft and nuclear weapons of satisfactory quality" to make it capable eventually "of devastating the heartland of the United States." The United States did have such decisive capability, however, LeMay asserted. He went on to describe "in cold terms what the United States is capable of doing to the Soviet Union today," a description as chilling as any in the literature of war:

> Let us assume the order had been received this morning to unleash the full weight of our nuclear force. (I hope, of course, this will never happen.) Between sunset tonight and sunrise tomorrow morning the Soviet Union would likely cease to be a major military power or even a major nation. . . . Dawn might break over a nation infinitely poorer than China—less populated than the United States and condemned to an agrarian existence perhaps for generations to come.

Everything depended on "the forces in being at the outset," LeMay emphasized. "The most radical effect of the changes in warfare is not upon how wars are won or lost, but upon how they will start. . . . The dominant fact is that no nation can arrive at a deliberate decision to wage war today unless it is clear, beyond any doubt, that victory is assured." What those facts meant, LeMay went on, was that "we are at war *now*." By defining the state of affairs between the United States and the U.S.S.R. as war *in progress*, LeMay blurred the difference between preven-

tive attack and preëmption: If the Soviet capability was growing, and some bombers always got through, then the time would come when SAC would no longer be able to deliver a clear victory. The United States and the Soviet Union would then be mutually deterred. Robert Oppenheimer had predicted that consequence in 1953 in an analysis in *Foreign Affairs:* "We may anticipate a state of affairs in which two Great Powers will each be in a position to put an end to the civilization and life of the other, though not without risking its own. We may be likened to two scorpions in a bottle, each capable of killing the other, but only at the risk of his own life."

LeMay evidently found the prospect of such stalemate intolerable. SAC was subject to Presidential authority. When the nation is threatened with a nuclear attack, the President, not the SAC commander, assumes the authority to order the use of military force. But LeMay had decided at the beginning of the Korean War, if not before, that there were circumstances under which he would override the Commander-in-Chief's prerogative. For example, the Atomic Energy Commission had custody of U.S. nuclear weapons, but in 1950 LeMay had attempted to arrange privately with the officer commanding the base in Albuquerque where the bombs were stored "to take the bombs" under SAC control if "we woke up some morning and there wasn't any Washington or something."

By 1957, he no longer needed to take the bombs. He had them. All that constrained him from delivering them was his soldier's oath. That same year, a committee Eisenhower appointed to study civil and continental defense sent a delegation to SAC to review the command's defenses against a Soviet surprise attack. The delegation included Robert Sprague, president of the Sprague Electric Company, in Massachusetts, and Jerome Wiesner, of M.I.T. As the Boston *Globe* reporter Fred Kaplan recounts in "The Wizards of Armageddon," when LeMay dismissed the delegation with a superficial tour, Sprague arranged for the President to order LeMay to coöperate. Sprague then had LeMay stage an alert. SAC needed more than six hours to take to the air. To Sprague that meant the command was vulnerable to surprise attack: Soviet bombers could make the flight over the North Pole in less than that time.

At SAC headquarters in Omaha, Sprague challenged LeMay. The General dismissed Sprague's concerns contemptuously. SAC had reconnaissance aircraft flying secret missions over the Soviet Union twenty-four hours a day. "If I see that the Russians are amassing their planes for an attack, I'm going to knock the shit out of them before they take off the ground." Sprague was shocked. "But General," he countered, "that's not national policy." Sprague remembered LeMay responding, "I don't care. It's my policy. That's what I'm going to do." According to another account, LeMay responded, "It's my job to make it possible for the President to change his policy"—a less insubordinate answer, but only barely. Sprague chose not to report LeMay's renegade remarks to the President and buried the incident for twenty years.

In the autumn of 1961, newly orbited United States reconnaissance satellites revealed that the Soviet Union had fewer strategic delivery systems than our intelligence had previously estimated—only forty-four ICBMs and a hundred and fifty-five heavy bombers (compared to the United States' hundred and fifty-six ICBMs, hundred and forty-four Polaris submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and thirteen hundred strategic bombers). Paul Nitze, a prominent hawk then serving as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, warned the Soviet Ambassador over lunch one day that the "missile gap"—which President John Kennedy had made a campaign issue in 1960—favored the United States; for good measure, the government leaked the story to the journalist Joseph Alsop, who reported the gap in a column. Kennedy may also have warned Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko directly in a private meeting at the White House.

Partly as a result of these warnings, the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, decided to install nuclear missiles secretly in Cuba early in 1962. By August, the C.I.A. was reporting that medium-range ballistic missiles might be part of the deployment. A U-2 overflight on October 14th first found MRBM sites

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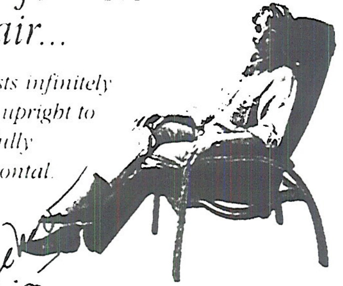

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in western Cuba. Kennedy condemned the secret installation and announced an impending naval "quarantine" on October 22nd—Monday night of a harrowing week when the superpowers verged on full-scale nuclear war.

The SAC commander at that time was Thomas Power, a LeMay protégé, who had led the March 10, 1945, firebombing mission over Tokyo. LeMay had been promoted to Air Force Chief of Staff, which put him in the Pentagon during the Cuban missile crisis. ("Those were ten days when neither Curt nor I went home," General David Burchinal, then LeMay's deputy chief for plans and programs, recalled. "We slept in the Pentagon right around the clock.") Power, it seems, was at least as eager as LeMay to "get World War III started." According to the political scientist Scott Sagan, in "The Limits of Safety," Power had been told by LeMay's predecessor as Chief of Staff, Thomas White, that he had the authority to do so. General White wrote Power in 1957 that "authority to order retaliatory attack may be exercised by CINCSAC"—the SAC commander—"if time or circumstances would not permit a decision by the President." McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national-security adviser, had warned the young President of just such a possibility. "A subordinate commander," Bundy alerted Kennedy in January, 1961, "faced with a substantial Russian military action could start the thermonuclear holocaust on his own initiative if he could not reach you (by failure of communication at either end of the line)." LeMay acknowledged in retirement that Power was "a sadist"; Sagan quotes one of Power's subordinate commanders who confirms that view:

> A hard, cruel individual. . . . I would like to say this. I used to worry about General Power. I used to worry that General Power was not stable. I used to worry about the fact that he had control over so many weapons and weapon systems and could, under certain conditions, launch the force. Back in the days before we had real positive control, SAC had the power to do a lot of things, and it was in his hands, and he knew it.

"Where did you get your husband?"

By Presidential order, the United States military went from DefCon (Defense Condition) 5 to DefCon 3 during Kennedy's Monday-night speech. DefCon 5 was business as usual; DefCon 3 was halfway up the scale. When Kennedy began speaking on national television, at seven o'clock, fifty-four SAC bombers, each carrying as many as four thermonuclear weapons, thundered off from continental bases to join the routine twelve-plane around-the-clock airborne alert. Some of the sixty-six bombers orbited the Mediterranean; others circumnavigated North America; others flew an Arctic route across Greenland, north of Canada, across Alaska, and down the Pacific Coast of North America. One orbited above Thule, Greenland, to observe and report any pre-attack Soviet assault on the crucial United States early-warning radar there. Polaris submarines put to sea. SAC armed the remaining planes of its bomber force, dispersed them to military and civilian airfields, and prepared some hundred and thirty Atlas and Titan ICBMs for firing. Kennedy and Khrushchev began an exchange of belligerent messages. Kennedy had convened an executive committee, or ExComm, of government officials to manage the crisis; opinion in the committee ranged from blockade to air strike to Cuban invasion. The President said afterward that the purpose of the alert was to deter a Soviet military response to whatever Caribbean action the United States decided to carry out: "The airborne alert," he congratulated SAC, "provided a strategic posture under which every United States force could operate with relative freedom of action." General Power saw a more threatening purpose, however; from his point of view, "This action by the nation's primary war deterrent force gave added meaning to the President's dec-

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Shouldering my daughter
like a set of pipes
I walk her
to a dead march
and counterpoint her crying
with my hummed drone:
the floo'ers o' the forest
are a' wi'ed awae

my cracked reed
blanking
on the high note,
the way a nib runs dry
in the rut it makes,
and splays.

—ROBIN ROBERTSON

laration that the U.S. would react to any nuclear missile launched from Cuba with a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union itself." Kennedy, that is, was thinking regional engagement under a nuclear umbrella; Power and LeMay were thinking global war.

On Wednesday, October 24th, when the naval quarantine took effect, SAC ratcheted from DefCon 3 to DefCon 2—the first and only time it was ever ordered to do so. SAC-alerted nuclear weapons increased to two thousand nine hundred and fifty-two; with a hundred and twelve Polaris SLBMs, their total destructive force exceeded seven thousand megatons. "We got everything we had in the strategic forces . . . counted down and ready and aimed," General Burchinal said afterward, "and we made damn sure they saw it without anybody saying a word about it." In fact, Power said several words about it, unauthorized and publicly, when he broadcast in the clear—in English rather than in code—to all SAC wings immediately after the move to DefCon 2 was announced:

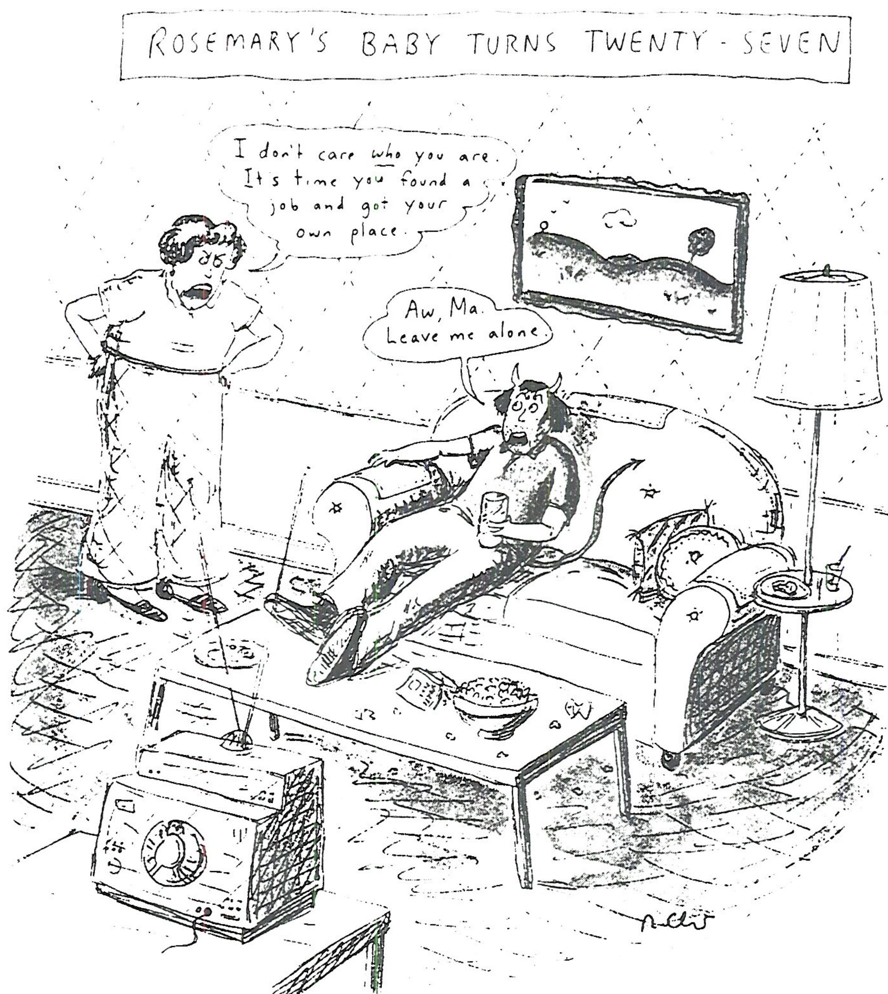
> This is General Power speaking. I am addressing you for the purpose of reëmphasizing the seriousness of the situation the nation faces. We are in an advanced state of readiness to meet any emergencies and I feel that we are well prepared. I expect each of you to maintain strict security and *use calm judgment during this tense period.* Our plans are well prepared and are being executed smoothly. . . . Review your plans for further action *to insure that there will be no mistakes or confusion.*

SAC routinely transmitted DefCon increases as unclassified messages until 1972, and Power was clearly emphasizing control. His broadcast was nevertheless a warning to the Soviets—who Power knew monitored such transmissions—that the United States had gone to full alert and might be planning "further action." Equally unsanctioned, and potentially catastrophic, notes Sagan, was the launch of an Atlas ICBM from Vandenberg Air Force Base, in California, across the Pacific to the Kwajalein test range, in the Marshall Islands, at 4 A.M. on October 26th, at the height of the Cuban missile crisis. SAC had taken over the test missiles at Vandenberg at the time of the DefCon 3 alert, programmed them with Soviet targets, and begun attaching nuclear warheads. The Atlas, which was unarmed, had been scheduled for testing; it was launched on its pre-crisis schedule with SAC concurrence—a deliberate provocation.

When the missile crisis began, the United States' first squadron of Minuteman I solid-fuel missiles was undergoing testing and certification prior to deployment at Malmstrom Air Force Base, in Montana. SAC, the Air Force Systems Command, and contractor personnel worked non-stop to ready the Minutemen for launch. A declassified history of the missile wing reports that "lack of equipment, both standard and test, required many work-arounds." The first Minuteman was ready to go on October 26th; five had been made operational by October 30th. But miswiring, wire shorts, and other problems left the missiles capable of being accidentally armed; one had to be shut down and restarted five times, because its guidance and control systems failed, and every Minuteman at Malmstrom had to be taken off alert repeatedly for repairs in the course of the crisis. For safety and control, immediate launch required redundant, coördinated keying by four officers in two physically separate launch-control centers. The Malmstrom work-around overrode that safety system. One officer who controlled the Minutemen during the missile crisis later told Sagan, "We didn't literally 'hot wire' the launch command system—that would be the wrong analogy—but we did have a second key. . . . I could have launched it on my own, if I had wanted to." An Air Force safety-inspection report noted after the crisis that "possible malfunctions of automated equipment . . . *posed serious hazards* [including] accidental launch." Another possibility, which the inspectors did not mention, was unauthorized launch.

According to Sagan, Air Defense Command F-106s armed with nuclear air-to-air missiles scrambled at Volk Field, in Wisconsin, on October 25th, when a launch klaxon went off in the middle of the night. Practice alert drills had been cancelled at DefCon 3, so when the klaxon sounded the interceptor crews assumed that they were going to war. Since they had not been briefed that SAC bombers were aloft, and they did not know SAC airborne-alert routes, there was a real possibility of U.S. missiles attacking U.S. bombers—nuclear friendly fire. The launch klaxon sounding was a mistake: an Air Force guard at the Duluth Sector Direction Center had sounded a sabotage alarm that somehow keyed the klaxon at Volk Field. The guard in Duluth had seen someone climbing the base security fence and had fired at the figure. An officer flashing his car lights drove onto the Volk Field runway and managed to stand down the F-106s; on closer inspection, the saboteur in Duluth had turned out to be a bear.

There were other serious command-and-control snafus during the missile



crisis as well: a U-2 strayed over Siberia, leading Khrushchev to complain to Kennedy that "an intruding American plane could be easily taken for a nuclear bomber, which might push us to a fateful step"; air-defense interceptors flew fully armed with nuclear rockets from which all safety devices had been removed; United States radar picked up an apparent missile launch from Cuba with a near-Tampa trajectory on Sunday morning, October 28th, which was determined only after predicted impact to have been a computer test tape; the United States Navy tracked Soviet submarines aggressively throughout the world, forcing them to surface, when it had been ordered to do so only in the area of quarantine.

MORE dangerous by far than all these incidents was Curtis LeMay's overconfident and belligerent advice to John F. Kennedy, whom he had believed since at least the stillborn invasion at Cuba's Bay of Pigs, in 1961, to be a coward. Knowing that the United States and the Soviet Union were approaching mutual deterrence and that SAC was therefore a wasting asset, LeMay pushed Kennedy to up the ante, bomb Cuba, and take out the missile sites. "The Kennedy administration thought that being strong as we were was provocative to the Russians and likely to start a war," he said with disgust in retirement. "We in the Air Force, and I personally, believed the exact opposite. . . . We could have gotten not only the missiles out of Cuba, we could have gotten the Communists out of Cuba at that time. . . . During that very critical time, in my mind there wasn't a chance that we would have gone to war with Russia because we had overwhelming strategic capability and the Russians knew it." According to Dino Brugioni, in his book "Eyeball to Eyeball," LeMay argued at one Pentagon briefing during the crisis that "the Russian bear has always been eager to stick his paw in Latin American waters. Now we've got him in a trap, let's take his leg off right up to his testicles. On second thought, let's take off his testicles, too." As LeMay's castration imagery implies, he may have been goading Kennedy to attack Cuba as an excuse to launch full strategic preëmption; discussing the missile crisis a decade later with the historian Ernest May, he said, according to May, that "it was his belief that at any point the Soviet Union could have been obliterated without more than normal expectable SAC losses on our side." In "On the Brink," an oral history of the crisis compiled by James Blight and David Welch, Robert McNamara, Kennedy's Secretary of Defense, remembers that, characteristically, "LeMay talked openly about a first strike against the Soviet Union if the Russians ever backed us into a corner."

Soon after the missiles were discovered, LeMay and the Joint Chiefs unanimously urged the President to order an immediate air strike against all military targets in Cuba. Fortunately, Kennedy resisted such pressure. Robert Kennedy later wrote, in "Thirteen Days":

> When the President questioned what the response of the Russians might be, General LeMay assured him there would be no reaction. President Kennedy was skeptical. "They, no more than we, can let these things go by without doing something. They can't, after all their statements, permit us to take out their missiles, kill a lot of Russians, and then do nothing. If they don't take action in Cuba, they certainly will in Berlin."

The President's instincts were sharper than the General's. The blockade worked; the crisis passed; Khrushchev capitulated. LeMay was outraged. At the Hawk's Cay Conference, a 1987 reunion of ExComm officials, McNamara remembered that LeMay made his feelings clear to Kennedy. "After Khrushchev had agreed to remove the missiles, President Kennedy invited the Chiefs to the White House so that he could thank them for their support during the crisis, and there was one hell of a scene. LeMay came out saying, 'We lost! We ought to just go in there today and knock 'em off!' "

At the height of the crisis, according to a retired SAC wing commander, SAC airborne-alert bombers deliberately flew past their customary turnaround points

toward the Soviet Union—an unambiguous threat that Soviet radar operators would certainly have recognized and reported. ("I knew what my target was," the SAC general adds. "Leningrad.") The bombers did eventually turn back, but, again, the provocation was clear.

NUCLEAR crises are not poker games. What Curtis LeMay and Thomas Power did not know—what no one in the United States government knew for certain until it was revealed at a conference between Soviet and U.S. missile-crisis participants in Moscow in 1989—was that, contrary to C.I.A. estimates, the Soviet forces in Cuba during the missile crisis possessed one- to three-megaton hydrogen warheads for some twenty medium-range ballistic missiles that could have been targeted on U.S. cities as far north as Washington, as well as warheads for short-range tactical artillery rockets that the Soviet field commanders in Cuba were authorized to use against a U.S. invasion force. The MRBMs would probably have been launched as well. At the Hawk's Cay Conference, McNamara recalled a conversation with a retired admiral who told him that "if they'd been NATO missiles . . . then the NATO officers, acting without Presidential authorization, would have been likely to use them rather than lose them." McNamara then admitted that "the fear that Soviet or Cuban officers might have reacted the way NATO officers might have was one reason I was extremely reluctant to risk the air strike."

In 1954, when LeMay calculated that he could deliver a Sunday punch of seven hundred and fifty atomic bombs to targets in the Soviet Union overnight, the Defense Department Weapons Systems Evaluation Group estimated that Soviet and Soviet-bloc casualties would total seventeen million injured and sixty million dead. In 1962, Power was prepared to deliver almost three thousand strategic nuclear weapons, many of them thermonuclear bombs, with yields totaling more than seven thousand megatons. Under such a rain of destruction, the United States would have killed at least a hundred million human beings in pursuit of the small group of Soviet leaders, who, as LeMay said in his 1956 lecture at the National War College, "have as their primary goal the . . . retention of power inside the U.S.S.R. in the few hands in which it now resides." If the Soviet field commanders in Cuba had launched their missiles as well, more millions of Americans would have been killed. Seven thousand megatons would also have been more than enough fire and brimstone to initiate a lethal nuclear winter over at least the Northern Hemisphere, freezing and starving yet more millions in Europe, Asia, and North America. If John Kennedy had followed LeMay's advice, history would have forgotten the Nazis and their terrible Holocaust. Ours would have been the historic omnicide.

THE discovery, in 1938, of how to release nuclear energy introduced a singularity into the human world, a deep new reality, a region where the old rules of war no longer applied. Total war—nuclear war—would be suicidal. The Cuban missile crisis finally taught the superpowers that lesson. The Soviet Union never went to full nuclear alert in all the years of the Cold War. After the missile crisis, the United States never did so again. Nor did the two nations ever again directly confront each other. That the exercise of national sovereignty was limited in a nuclear world was not a lesson that LeMay was willing to learn. He went on to champion unsuccessfully the strategic bombing of North Vietnam, dams and all; in 1968, three years after he retired from the Air Force, he teamed with George Wallace to run unsuccessfully as an independent candidate for Vice-President of the United States. Until his death, in 1990, this remarkable leader, whose efforts to carry out an impossible assignment took the world within a hair's breadth of nuclear destruction, continued to believe that the United States had "lost" the Cuban missile crisis and the Cold War. We had not lost, nor had we won. The world had won. Science had revealed a limit to total war. ♦

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

[*Letter in the Denver Post*]

I applaud your recent editorial, "Don't teach kids to expect money for good morals." Lakewood High School's plan to pay $50 to teenagers for advance tips on illegal keg parties could set a dangerous precedent. Students should not be bribed to do what is morally proper. When I was a teenager no one paid us to be good. We were good for nothing.

She needs shoes, clothing, food in the home. This shouldn't be what a five year old in America has to think about.

Jenny's sad little eyes tell a story of poverty – a kind of harsh existence that is rampant in the Appalachian coal mining country.

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Dept. Y6C5, Richmond, Va. 23220 USA

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