

## 20 Years of Dynamic Deterrence

### Deterrence Still Comes First

(Part 8 of a 22 part series)

*In December 2014, Air Force Global Strike Command (AFGSC) is recognizing the 70th anniversary of the Continental Air Forces, the predecessor of Strategic Air Command (SAC) and today's AFGSC. To commemorate this, the Command History Office is re-publishing a series of stories detailing the first 20 years of SAC. The SAC Press Service originally published these stories in 1966 to commemorate the first 20 years of Strategic Air Command. They were re-published in 1971 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of SAC. Though the AFGSC History Office has edited the original text to correct syntax and to provide insight, the context of the original text remains and the reader must view these articles looking through the lens of history.*

In December 1944, the Army Air Forces created the Continental Air Forces to coordinate the activities of the four Numbered Air Forces (First, Second, Third, and Fourth) stationed in the United States. However, strategic bombardment operations during World War II showed the need for a major command devoted exclusively to strategic, long-range air combat operations. So, in March 1946, the Army Air Forces re-designated the Continental Air Forces as the Strategic Air Command. The Strategic Air Command served as America's greatest deterrent to the threat of nuclear attack on the continental United States from the early 1950's until May 1992. To accomplish this mission, the command maintained a stable of long range strike bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles along with a fleet of air-to-air refueling tankers and reconnaissance assets. However, during 1992, as a result of the diminishing danger of massive nuclear warfare and the disappearance of a meaningful distinction between strategic and tactical missions, the United States Air Force disestablished the Strategic Air Command, dividing its assets and missions among the newly created Air Combat Command, Air Mobility Command, and Air Force Space Command. Seventeen years later, on 7 August 2009, the Air Force reactivated Strategic Air Command and then re-designated the organization as Air Force Global Strike Command. Air Force Global Strike Command with its six wings contains the nation's entire inventory of Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear capable B-2 and B-52 bomber aircraft with the Air Force's newest Major Command perpetuating the proud heritage of the Continental Air Forces and Strategic Air Command.

*Originally released 6 May 1966 [edited for clarity]*

SAC PRESS SERVICE

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20 YEARS OF DYNAMIC DETERRENCE

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While the Korean War was a decisive test of the U.S. policy of “containment” of Communist expansion, it was not the only defense task of the early fifties, nor was it the most important. Then, as now, the primary mission of all U.S. defense forces was the security of the United States. And, while the Korean conflict was a bloody, expensive war, its combat never threatened that security.

Another threat was for more direct. As Air Force Secretary Thomas K. Finletter stated in a memorandum to Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall, in March 1951, “. . . The ability of Strategic Air Command to strike powerful retaliatory blows in response in any attacks against this nation was increased as a matter of urgent necessity and to lessen the possibility that a major war might be forced upon us.” Like others experts, Secretary Marshall feared that the Korean conflict was a Soviet feint to get U.S. forces committed on the other side of the world, then make its major move in Europe.

Thus, the most dangerous potential in the Korean conflict was the possibility that it could grow – “escalate” into a world war – a war which modern Soviet air power would bring direct to American cities and homes.

At least two possibilities could escalate the war – just as they could have [done in] the Berlin Blockade [crisis].

First, the Free World could fail to stand up to piecemeal Communist aggression and be later forced to fight a desperate war for survival; or second, the Free World could be so weakened by fighting small wars to “contain” Communism that a surprise direct attack against the United States might give the Communists a cheap and easy path to their goal of world domination.

These possibilities could not be allowed to happen. As Secretary Finletter suggested, it was SAC’s mission, with other American military forces, during the Korean conflict, to prevent them from happening.

Post Korean Policy

After Korea, even though open fighting had stopped, the threat of direct Communist attack on the United States, either through escalation or by surprise, grew more serious.

In the spring of 1954, military observers at the Moscow Air Show were surprised to see two new Soviet jet bombers fly overhead. They were the same type aircraft as the new SAC B-47 and B-52 bombers. And, their giant engines suggested they might even be superior to the American aircraft.

The Soviets were known at the time to have about 1,000 copies of the B-29. But these aircraft lacked the range to be a serious direct [to the American Homeland] threat even with atomic weapons. Following, as they did, a long unsuccessful limited war in Korea, the appearance of new Soviet long-range bombers suggested a Communist change in both capability and strategy.

President [Dwight D.] Eisenhower was the first United States Chief Executive in our almost 200-year history to face the open threat of sudden destruction, in a matter of minutes, of American cities and homes.

It was clear to President Eisenhower in 1954, that the Soviets had both the nuclear weapons and a pair of high performance delivery systems to carry them when the time was ripe.

Add to this fact the surprising explosion of the first Soviet hydrogen bomb in August 1953 – short months after the first U.S. H-bomb test – plus the uncertainty of Soviet intentions after Stalin's death [on 5 March 1953], and you can see why the end of the Korean conflict brought increased U.S. emphasis on strategic forces and nuclear deterrence.

Therefore, both during and after the Korean conflict the biggest part of SAC's efforts and energy was directed at strengthening the United States nuclear deterrent.

(NEXT STORY: Part 9, SAC in the Early Fifties)