

Book Review

To Rule the Skies: General Thomas S. Power and the Rise of Strategic Air Command in the Cold War

Brent D Ziarnick

Annapolis: Naval Institute Press

2021, 228 pages

ISBN 978-1-6824-7587-4

This book is one in a series designed to explore previously ignored facets of the history of airpower in the United States. It is a biography of an outstanding United States Air Force (USAF) aviator, General Thomas Sarsfield Power, who – after having gone through a difficult childhood – left high school and joined the Air Corps Flying School as a student pilot. After obtaining his wings, Power was commissioned into the Air Flying Corps, without having a college degree. His early career included assignments at most of the famed air corps bases of the day, including that of flying instructor, attending the Air Tactical School as well as completing a well-rounded early career as an engineering and armament officer. As one of the first Air Postal Services pilots, he gained many flying hours and navigational experiences, which saw his abilities being rewarded by promotion and postings into operational positions. These through-the-rank experiences took him to bases as far afield as Singapore, where he honed his bombing, weaponry, and rocket skills in the early years before the Second World War. In later years, this would account for his interest in and development of rocket technologies in the Strategic Air Command (SAC). During all these years, his lack of a college degree was frowned upon by most of his senior officers. However, many of his commanding officers rated his flying abilities and skills very highly, and supported this in their merit assessments. The latter, together with his management skills gained as a flying and weapons instructor, saw him gain deserved promotion by the time America entered the Second World War.

Power served with distinction in both the European and Pacific theatres during the Second World War, and led the first large-scale firebomb raid on Tokyo in March 1945. After this, Power was appointed deputy chief of operations of the Strategic Air Forces in the Pacific, and served in this position during the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. A brilliant and successful officer at all levels of command, he accomplished his missions facing considerable personal and professional obstacles but overcame them to become the operational and strategic leader needed during the Cold War (1945 to 1991) and the Cuban missile crisis (October 1962).

In 1948, Power was appointed vice commander of the SAC and served under General Curtis E LeMay, then commander-in-chief of the Strategic Air Command (CINCSAC) of the USAF. Although he served in the shadow of LeMay, Power was ‘a stern but compassionate man of faith, devotion and character, deeply respected by the men who knew him well’.⁵⁸¹ Rather than being a carbon copy of LeMay – as he was often seen by the senior officer corps, administrators and politicians – Power was an innovative and daring commander, largely responsible for integrating the SAC as an aerospace force, especially while serving as CINCSAC from 1957 until his retirement in 1964. The intent of the SAC was to deter military attacks on the United States, its territories, and its allies with conventional weapons and, if the deterrent failed, to counter the attack with nuclear weapons. The mission was to develop and provide combat-ready air forces for nuclear deterrence and global strike operations as well as safe and effective cover and support to the United States President and combat commanders – in effect “to rule the skies”. The SAC was the greatest deterrent force in the world at the time – and still is today. The author decries the fact that Power did not receive recognition for being, arguably, the father of the SAC and a major contributor to the development of the strategic B-52 bomber and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) deterrent weapons during the Cold War era.

In the late 1960s, the strategic bomber seemed to be following the battleship and the cavalry horse into obsolescence. However, due to the aerospace experience, knowledge, and dogged persistence of men such as Power, the SAC and the B-52 bombers were born. With an always aloft nuclear first-strike capability strategy, and a supply chain cleverly and deliberately cast across many US political and congressional obstacles, Power achieved his goals for a sustainable and viable SAC. Even today, 60 years later, the B-52 is retained as a conventional bomber, fully operational. Power’s innovativeness as well as his technical and aerospace management skills and expertise deserves full credit for his personal contribution to all of the above.

As a stickler for discipline, rules, and procedures, Power was personally involved in writing new doctrine for the SAC, inclusive of training methods and procedures, conventional and nuclear strike capabilities, time-to-deployment requirements, radar bombing scoring assessments, and integrated management systems using various configurations of air assets on a 24/7 operational basis. He had first-hand knowledge and experience of flying bomber aircraft, as well as weaponry expertise, innovation, and vision to assess a situation, and was able to evaluate the risks a commander needs to take in times of crisis. His innovations helped to prevent nuclear war through airpower deterrence.

The book relates the career of Power, and especially his forgotten contributions to the early space programme and early doctrine for military space activity. It explains the role of Power in establishing General Bernard Schriever’s Western Development Division as a true space organisation rather than as a ballistic missile organisation, and it catalogues Power’s efforts to transform the SAC into a Strategic Aerospace Command including a manned strategic space force. *Ziarnick’s book* covers the span of both Power’s personal and professional life, and challenges most of the myths of conventional knowledge about Power. The work has been thoroughly researched, and is based on archival data obtained from the US Air University library. *Ziarnick’s* study is further supported by important



contributions made by military colleagues and academics associated with military aviation at the Air University. In fact, after reading Ziarnick's excellent account, one wonders why it took so long for a biography of this calibre on Power to be published. It is hard to think of another figure whose military service spanned the Second World War (1939–1945), the Korean War (1950–1953), the Cuban missile crisis (1962), the nuclear age and beginnings of the space age, all in the space of 37 years.

The book comprises eight chapters of a well-written narrative reflecting a logical layout, numerous pictures clearly reproduced, supportive notes, and a comprehensive bibliography. References to further recommended readings, articles and literature are included.

In reading and considering Ziarnick's book, the question that needs to be asked is towards which readership this book is targeted. The author targets, in the reviewer's opinion, past and present critics of Power in the US military aviation history domain, as well as future students to the USAF and Air University, with the intent of giving them a balanced perspective on the Cold War and the aviation challenges Power faced during his tenure. Amongst these were the anti-nuclear lobbyists in the US Senate, the interference by the Secretary of State and other senators in budget constraints, and the air asset requirements, showing preference to missiles rather than strategic bombers.

South Africa has never in its history been exposed to strategic bombing of any sorts. While the contemporary military community in South Africa might not be attracted to the book for various reasons, it is, however, a good read and reference for military strategists and students at tertiary military educational institutions. There exists an invisible conflict between the military operational cadres and the geopolitical and military bureaucracy. In that context, African air forces could relate to the book and the challenges faced by Power to build the SAC and the *reasons d'être* for it. During his 37 years of military service and seven-year tenure as CINCSAC, Power was willing to take on political bureaucrats, government officials, US military command structures, and civilian personnel in acquisition and financial structures, as well as the likes of the US Secretary of Defense. His unwavering persistence to ensure that the United States of America had an effective and capable airborne deterrent against any potential aggressor, is arguably lacking in African air command structures today. The latter would find much food for thought by reading this book.

To Rule the Skies has been reviewed by many high-ranking USAF officers close to the proverbial operational rock face of the SAC; any additional material would be superfluous. To this end, it sufficed to tabulate recommended areas of note and of possible interest in the African context. This was achieved by an excellent, well-written introduction to the work, arguably one of the best the reviewer has had the pleasure of reading. It provides highlights of each chapter of the book in a manner clearly and easily understandable – from Power's early childhood, to his entry into the Flying Cadet programme, and the role that he played in constructing the USAF and, in particular, the SAC. Ziarnick discusses the role of Power as CINCSAC during the difficult years of the Cold War, through the various contributions he made to the post-Second World War construction of the US



Aerospace Force (previously known as the US Air Force). The book also covers General Power's role as a member of the Air Research and Development Council (1961–1976), and the challenges he faced during that period. A *per aspera ad astra* role model ("through hardships to the stars") indeed.

In summary, *To Rule the Skies* is a well-constructed and concisely written book incorporating a balanced combination of textual explanations and well-presented arguments in support of placing General Power and the SAC in the correct historical context of both the USAF and the National Space Program. While the book is targeted at a USAF and US aerospace audience, it is recommended to African defence organisations, air force decision-makers and their air commanders as further reading as they consider their strategic planning for using modern technologies in aeronautical and space science as a future operational imperative.

Dr (Col.) Alan J Nelson (ret.) 

Independent researcher

ENDNOTES

⁵⁸¹ BD Ziarnick, *To Rule the Skies: General Thomas S. Power and the Rise of Strategic Air Command in the Cold War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2021), 5.

