

1995

The Office of the Secretary of the Air Force, 1947-1965

David R. Mets

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Mets, David R. (1995) "The Office of the Secretary of the Air Force, 1947-1965," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 48 : No. 3 , Article 21.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol48/iss3/21>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

126 Naval War College Review

early 1960s, the institution had opted to cling to the airplane, thereby turning the means of the original ACTS theory into an end. Hence, Air Force aviators revealed that their real affection was for their airplanes, not for the concept of striking at the heart of the enemy, and from this abandonment of theory sprang the institutional crisis that afflicts the Air Force today.

Builder's analysis holds up best within the context of the Cold War. Ballistic missiles, especially, offered an alternative to the long-range bomber for nuclear deterrence. Builder is not mistaken in arguing that until Russian missile and space developments forced the Air Force's hand its leaders were reluctant to give such systems priority over bomber development.

Nuclear war, though, proved to be a dead end, and even today it is far from clear that Air Force leaders were mistaken in clinging to the airplane for *non-nuclear* warfare. However, the real-world problem that Builder overlooks—by implying that the Air Force should long ago have shifted from aircraft to missiles for contingencies like the 1991 Persian Gulf War—is the high cost of cruise weapons like the Tomahawk Land Attack Missile (TLAM). Careful analysis of Desert Storm and the major regional contingencies now being envisioned by the Pentagon indicates that even if such campaigns were waged exclusively with precision weapons, *from thirty-five to forty-five thousand weapons would still be needed*. With prices in the vicinity of \$1 million per round or more, munitions like TLAM and their Air Force equivalents are simply too expensive to

be expended in quantities of more than a few thousand. True, cruise missiles employed in small quantities can, as they did in Desert Storm, play a crucial role early in a campaign. Nonetheless, barring technical breakthroughs that bring their costs down to levels comparable with laser-guided bombs (\$65,000 to \$85,000 each), these weapons can provide only a small fraction of the stockpile necessary for real-world campaigns; the bulk of the munitions will continue to be direct-attack weapons delivered by aircraft. This substantial oversight notwithstanding, however, *The Icarus Syndrome* will be of interest to all concerned with air power theory and the institutional dynamics of military services.

BARRY D. WATTS
Bethesda, Maryland

Watson, George M., Jr. *The Office of the Secretary of the Air Force, 1947-1965*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1993. 390pp. (No price given)

A favorite teacher once told me, "Be careful what you pray for, you might get it!" She might well have been instructing the heavyweights of the United States Army Air Force of the early 1940s, especially General Henry H. Arnold, the Commander Army Air Force, General Carl Spaatz, Commander Army Air Force, and Lieutenant General Lauris Norstad, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Headquarters, U.S. Air Force. After World War II, at the onset of the great

unification debate, they, along with many influential leaders of the ground Army, pushed hard for a centralization of the services and a powerful secretary of defense. Their efforts, however, were largely frustrated by the Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, who was supported by the bulk of the most powerful officers in that service. Arnold and Spaatz long professed that they most wanted one service but that if that was not possible, two would not be satisfactory and so three would have to be the outcome. However, Forrestal and most of the Navy were sure that to have one service (i.e., one secretary and one chief of staff) would result in a perpetual two-to-one majority within its headquarters against the Navy and all that it stood for—this in the wake of the greatest naval victory in history. In a wonderful demonstration of effective bureaucratic politics (with substantial assistance from friends in Congress), Forrestal and others guaranteed that there would be three services.

Dr. George Watson is admirably suited to tell this story by his many years of service at the Office of the Chief of Air Force History and more recently as the Chief of the Air Staff History section in the Pentagon. He is an Army veteran who served in Vietnam, and he is the author of two Air Force publications on that war. His expertise in oral history allowed him to interview personally many of the participants of this story.

The book is organized chronologically, with separate chapters on the tenures of the first seven civilian leaders of the new service, along with a few topical chapters, such as on the B-36 controversy. The organization of the

U.S. Air Force and the main issues that faced each secretary during his term are principal topics throughout the work.

Forrestal got what he prayed for, but he came to regret it when, as secretary of defense, he discovered the difficulties entailed in the strict limitation of the powers of that office. Ultimately, however, the Air Force got what it wanted with the gradual centralization of power in the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

This book is well researched, craftsmanlike, and well written. It includes a substantial set of appendices with organization charts of the Secretary's office and the text of the National Security Act of 1947, as well as of subsequent legislation. Understandably, the sea of literature that has been written on this subject inhibits the development of a full bibliography; Watson has necessarily limited his coverage to a "bibliographical note" that is successful in identifying the most prominent and worthy sources. In any event, the fiftieth anniversary of the U.S. Air Force guarantees that any bibliography written now will soon be outdated.

Secretary of the Air Force will interest not only the national security scholar desiring background on the early years of the U.S. Air Force but also, as a reference book, those with a special interest in that subject and in organization for national defense.

DAVID R. METS
School of Advanced Airpower Studies
Air University
