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Edward Kaplan. *To Kill Nations: American Strategy in the Air-Atomic Age and the Rise of Mutually Assured Destruction.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. 272 pp. Illustrations. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5248-2.

Reviewed by Kristan Stoddart (Aberystwyth University)

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach

Detailed histories of each of the established nuclear powers are always welcome. They add to the sparse scholarly record that has depended on a relatively small number of books drawing on declassified documentary records. Edward Kaplan is an associate professor at the US Air Force Academy, and his expertise on US nuclear (atomic) strategy reflects the views of the US Air Force's (USAF) strategists and their predisposition to air power. Kaplan is reasonably explicit regarding this predisposition. The roles of the USAF, the Strategic Air Command (SAC), and nuclear bombardment in US strategy in the early to mid-Cold War years are discussed early in the book. The USAF and SAC had an actionable strategy for "winning" a war (so long as the other side did not have nuclear capability of its own and a means to deliver it), which is a reflection of the time. Still, I would have liked to see this book set aerial nuclear bombardment debates within the context of what would become ideas of battlefield nuclear weapons as an adjunct to air power—as they developed under President Dwight Eisenhower's "New Look" strategy of the early 1950s. Interservice rivalry certainly played a part in overall national strategy, both declaratory and operational, as it did in other states, such as Britain and France, but strategic culture also played a part both at the interservice level, within government and treasury debates, and at the foreign policy level. While this complex interplay is present in Kaplan's book, his starting points are quite narrow, focusing on early ideas of airpower from Giulio Douhet and the like.

Kaplan's opening chapter lays out that senior air force officials, like Carl Spaatz, Thomas Power, and Cur-

tis E. LeMay, and those who were reporting on the results of the surveys conducted of the bombing campaigns against Germany and Japan, were coming to the conclusion that atomic weapons could be a military force multiplier and be used to concentrate force on high-value or high-priority targets. Chapter 2 discusses early strategic nuclear targeting priorities, which not only were based on principles established during World War II but also showed no visible ethical dilemma in targeting industrial and population centers. Nuclear weapons at this stage were not viewed as a radically different weapon but an "incremental improvement on earlier weapons" (p. 39). Kaplan would have been better served if he had not blended in one chapter (chapter 2) his discussion of the decision to move from fission weapons to thermonuclear weapons. The move to thermonuclear weapons deserves a separate chapter because of the significantly enlarged destructiveness and the alteration of the strategic calculus that resulted from their potential use. Chapter 3 deals with an interesting discussion of the interservice rivalry between the air force, navy, and army, and examines the frequent competing views of nuclear strategy and the roles they would play in what the USAF was intending to be a short and decisive war (against a non-nuclear power).

There are few nonproliferation measures mentioned in this book and limited treatment of White House and presidential views. Indeed, there is generally little said outside of air force views of nuclear/atomic weapons in the early chapters. This will limit the book's appeal to air power specialists and students interested in air power. Furthermore, the chronology and narrative is jumpy. For

example, the last eight pages of chapter 3 discuss the Korean War and what consequences there could have been in escalating the conflict through nuclear use and whether there were any suitable targets. Kaplan does, however, sense the self-deterrence of an “atomic taboo” developing (p. 75). Because this discussion of the nuclear taboo occurs at the end of a chapter about interservice rivalry, it leads me to conclude that the author and publisher could not decide on where themes needed to be advanced at the expense of chronology and vice versa, producing something of a hodgepodge. The book, in general, could have been better structured.

Another example of this disorganization is found in chapter 4, where Kaplan jumps from the Korean War to incremental advancements in long-range bombers and then missiles. This development eventually led to Sputnik and the first Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), which made the United States vulnerable. This led SAC to worry about possible preemptive strikes on their forces and to prepare their forces through airborne alerts and dispersals. What chapter 4 does well is to put some flesh on the bones of the strategic planning of the early to mid-1950s, although chronological jumps are again evident. Chapter 5, which tackles the fine-grain detail on American strategic bombing plans, offers new and helpful information on these plans and the thinking underlying them. As Kaplan claims, “The threat of an atomic offensive was powerful, but the cost of executing one was daunting. Despite all the rhetoric of massive retaliation, politicians were unwilling to press forward and even planning did not get very far” (p. 130).

Chapter 6 offers some challenges to USAF/SAC views of nuclear strategy from the army and especially from the navy whose nuclear role was being championed by Admiral Arleigh Burke. Despite this chapter offering to open the narrow air force/air-atomic view Kaplan demonstrates up to this point, it fails to do so. It makes insufficient mention of the reason for the adoption of Polaris and the challenges manned aircraft were facing against the Soviet Union due to improving anti-aircraft defenses—including guided missiles. This chapter also does not make major mention of Sputnik, which changed American strategic thinking. America was now vulnerable in a way it had never been before through a potential strike by ICBMs. Placing the USAF/SAC challenges in a wider strategic context would have benefited Kaplan’s arguments.

Insufficient context is a problem common to the book as a whole. For example, *To Kill Nations* does not place

the USAF debates in a wide enough context. Given that so much has already been written on these issues, it is surprising that this contextual vista is omitted.[1] Strategy does not form in a vacuum and strategic choices are made not only on the basis of what a given state can do, the United States in this case, but also on what the opponent, the Soviet Union, can do or convince an adversary what they are capable of doing. The air-atomic view Kaplan has is too narrow to offer a wider or deeper insight into an already evolved and mature literature base which takes into account a broader series of strategic drivers and dynamics than one that only concentrates on the USAF/SAC.

The second half of chapter 6, one of the strongest chapters in the book, covers the early development of the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP). The sheer volume of targets in the newly formed SIOP-62 was, and remains, a level of overkill that is difficult to comprehend. It was tied into notions of “Assured Destruction” which were borne out of SAC and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Chapter 7 opens with the inauguration of John Kennedy to the presidency in January 1961. Partly because of Kennedy’s premature death, partly because of the perceived dynamism of his “whiz kids,” such as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and partly because of the precipice faced in the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, the Kennedy administration has been subject to extensive scholarly work in the field of nuclear weapons. The re-questioning of US nuclear strategy by McNamara during both the Kennedy administration and subsequent Lyndon Johnson administration is well known. That Kennedy had a difficult relationship with his senior military advisers is less well known. The remainder of the chapter deals with the “twin concepts” of Assured Destruction and City Avoidance. This part of the chapter is well reasoned and a good articulation of both the nuclear strategy of the period and the personalities and personal conflicts that brought it about.

The first part of chapter 8 covers two of the most notable events of the Kennedy administration: the Berlin Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis. The remainder of the chapter covers the SIOP in the aftermath of these crises and the cancellation of the B-70 Valkyrie and Skybolt air-launched nuclear missile. Both platforms were victims of changing strategic conditions and were now vulnerable to Soviet air defenses as well as competing systems from the navy in the shape of ballistic missile submarines and the development of the submarine-launched ballistic missile Polaris, which offered Assured Destruction and an

assured second strike capability which enhanced the deterrent effect of US strategic forces. This, in turn, helped diminish ideas of “victory” in any nuclear war, which in the early years of America’s air-atomic strategy had been conceived by the USAF and SAC. These changes are addressed in the conclusion.

Overall, this book gets better as it goes on, but its structure does not help the flow of the narrative. Its mix of themes should have been better thought through in terms of readability and structured more coherently. The work does, however, offer some new and insightful information.

Kaplan deserves credit for his mining and navigation of the declassified documentary record and what remains classified varies wildly in nuclear weapons states. There is usually a rich seam of (not always accurate) open source material to mine and perhaps for this reason book-length treatments of nuclear history tend to stay rooted in the 1940s to early 1960s. In 2015, and into 2016, my hope is that more of the records from the 1970s and 1980s have been declassified as they have been in the United Kingdom. If the UK is the exception (in adopting a 20-Year Rule alongside a Freedom of Information Act that provides rapid decisions regarding releases and retentions), why is this? I would like to see our scholarship provide a better understanding of the policies and strate-

gies of the US-Soviet strategic relationship, their erstwhile allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Warsaw Pact, and other nuclear weapons states (including proliferating states, such as South Africa, who turned away from this path) during the post-1964 period. I would have found this more valuable than another pre-1964 history/political science book on nuclear weapons. This review is therefore also an appeal to move our understanding into the second half of the Cold War when possible and not only to attempt to further refine what happened in the early years of the Cold War. It poses the question, a question I believe is relevant in helping us understand how today’s nuclear order has come about, as to why we have not seen more full-length book treatments of the nuclear history drawn from the declassified record—work that will move our understanding into the latter half of the Cold War.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991); and Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

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