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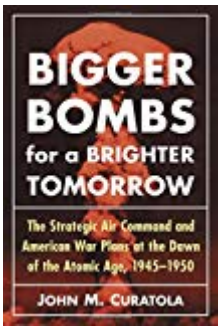
John M. Curatola. *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow: The Strategic Air Command and American War Plans at the Dawn of the Atomic Age, 1945-1950.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2015. 277 pp. $35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-9419-4.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Deriving its title from a post-WWII "tongue-in-cheek comment at the [Air Force] Weapons Laboratory" about the country's nuclear arsenal, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow* sheds important new light on the status and early development of US nuclear deterrent forces from the end of World War II through 1950 (p. 2). Although not the first book addressing nuclear issues of that era, *Bigger Bombs* manages to add to the literature while remaining compact in length.

Central to John M. Curatola's argument is that the United States "was bluffing with regard to its atomic arsenal and capability" during the early Cold War years, although "most Americans were ignorant of the situation" (p. 2). The author breaks with some other recent scholarship on the subject by emphasizing that the actual situation was "an even drearier picture of American atomic warfare capabilities than what previous books have articulated" (p. 3). The impression gained from much of this other literature is that key policy and personnel decisions in 1947 and 1948 set the Air Force and the Strategic Air Command (SAC) in particular on a firm footing to become not only the country's main instrument of deterrence but also a capable and credible force. *Bigger Bombs* insists that vulnerability was far greater and longer than had been imagined then or described afterward. Far from simply making the assertion, Curatola proceeds to lay out extensive information about the country's early war plans. A consistent feature among these was that the planners themselves were kept unaware of the condition and size of the nuclear stockpile.

The book's organization complements the desire to reexamine US nuclear deterrence at the outset of the Cold War. Three chapters outlining the Cold War strategic setting, the tense and uncooperative relationship between the civilian Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) and the armed forces, and the competition between military branches in the postwar years of lean budgets constitute the first major part of the book. The middle portion of the book explores US war planning, and only in the closing third of the book does attention focus primarily on the Air Force

leaders and on the aircraft technologies constituting the SAC.

By focusing first on the context and on the nuclear weapon technologies—and limitations—Curatola helps display the frailties in a nuclear arsenal that was at first small but that also carried inherently boggling complexities to overcome during use. Rather than seeming obscure or irrelevant, information about issues, such as the steps needed to assemble first-generation nuclear weapons, is woven into the narrative and indeed into the center of Curatola's argument. Similarly, discussion about the production of fissile material is detailed and also helps explain decisions about weapons types.

One of the inescapable themes in the security decision making of the era was that officials, including President Harry Truman, identified a Soviet threat but concluded that the USSR was unable to strike imminently in a military sense. This line of thought, perhaps coupled with top leaders' limited understanding of the frailties of the nuclear stockpile, seems to have facilitated a degree of nonchalance about the limited credibility of a US nuclear strike. The book painstakingly shows the shortcomings and false assumptions in early Cold War US war plans and also makes the point that "the AEC's close-hold on atomic secrets precluded any efficient planning regarding the use of the bomb" (p. 102). Most of the period covered in the study also saw planners attempt to outline ideas without receiving even basic policy guidance about national objectives.

Curatola ensures that readers cannot miss his point that "the ways in which the United States sought to defeat the Soviets by an atomic aerial offensive were poorly funded, ill-conceived, speciously planned, badly organized," and at the same time "relentlessly optimistic" in the face of both contrary evidence about the US capacity to launch nuclear strikes and crucial unknowns about Soviet air defense capabilities (p. 134). Whether describing the limitations of intelligence gathering for developing effective target lists, expansion and redirection of training for SAC personnel, or the net difficulties with easy-to-use but hard-to-maintain radar bombing aids, ***Bigger Bombs*** incorporates rich details into the narrative. This is a crisp book that reads smoothly, presenting a wealth of solid information in a cogent way. This is particularly important, because the technical aspects of the early part of the Cold War are all too often either overlooked or simplistically understood. In exploring the complex process of constructing and using early nuclear weapons, the institutional walls set up by the existence of the AEC and its leadership, the serious inadequacies of available intelligence information, the technical limitations of SAC aircraft, and the training shortcomings of personnel, among other topics, the reader is brought to the author's conclusion, that "America's atomic abilities remained largely stagnant and poorly resourced" (p. 193).

Given its compact size and the considerable explanatory and descriptive power, ***Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*** would be a useful addition to an undergraduate Cold War book list and is an important book for scholars as well.

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