

**Brian D. Laslie.** *Architect of Air Power: General Laurence S. Kuter and the Birth of the US Air Force.* American Warrior Series. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017. Illustrations. 254 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-6998-9.

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**Published on** H-War (February, 2019)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Brian D. Laslie's *Architect of Air Power: General Laurence S. Kuter and the Birth of the US Air Force* chronicles the career of this notable but comparatively unknown general while also telling the early story of the air force's history. Although Laurence S. Kuter, who skipped the rank of colonel, gained temporary fame at the age of thirty-six for being the youngest general since William Sherman, he largely worked behind the scenes, playing a key role in organization building and training.

In addition to his organizational work, Kuter served what Laslie considers to be successful albeit short stints in combat during World War II. Highlights include commanding a B-17 wing and helping implement tactical airpower in North Africa, an experience he parlayed into writing *Field Manual 100-20* that emphatically declared airpower's equality with land-based power. After World War II, he led Military Air Transport Service, the Air University, and the Far East Air Forces. He also headed the North American Air Defense Command, where Laslie now works as the deputy command historian and also serves as an adjunct professor at the Air Force Academy.

Graduating from West Point in 1927, Kuter decided to pursue field artillery rather than aviation after he witnessed one of his classmates die

in an incentive flight. His desire to be a better artilleryman drew him to aviation because he sought to improve his ability to spot targets. Ultimately, however, he quickly became passionate about airpower.

Unlike some other biographies of air force generals, this is no hagiography. Laslie—although generally painting a favorable portrait of Kuter—happily points out some of his weaknesses, particularly his veer toward more dogmatic ideas about airpower. Laslie characterizes his relentless commitment to strategic bombing, for example, as “shortsighted” (p. 112).

Kuter's career parallels the enormous transition in airpower that occurred in the first several generations of aviators. Kuter first flew a wood and canvas biplane. At the end of his career, he tasted the speed of the jet age, traveling at twice the speed of sound in an F-106.

It is in doubling as a history of the air force that this work shines, particularly given the amusing anecdotes of the future air force that litter this account. In perhaps the best story, Laslie describes Kuter brewing beer on base during Prohibition. When the beer literally exploded one night during a party at his house bringing the MPs (military police) to investigate, guests streamed out quickly into the streets. Everyone fled except one

guest—Haywood Hansell—who would go on to be a lifelong friend. At other times, Laslie's lively prose organizes and categorizes air force history in ways that might be less useful. For example, he characterizes the air force's transition in terms of leadership: "if the early aviators—men like Curtis LeMay and Jimmy Doolittle—were cowboys, then Kuter represented the first-generation lawman who came to town to impose order" (p. 18). It is unclear, though, why LeMay merits consideration of an "early aviator" when Kuter initially outranked LeMay.

The work suffers from a few other minor weaknesses. Laslie makes rather sweeping claims in his introduction that the work will be a "social, cultural, political, and military history" that are not fully borne out (p. 4), especially if one tends to think of Michael S. Sherry's *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (1987) when considering cultural history of airpower. Second, the work's editing is a bit hasty at times, with noticeable repetition of exact phrasing in close proximity.

There are two groups of people who should especially be interested in this book. The first group is those readers who already are acquainted with air force history yet seek to have the air force's early history come alive for them, to almost step into the world of the 1920s and the 1930s, such as when the then captain Claire Chennault almost washed Kuter out of flight school. The second group consists of those unfamiliar with the history of the air force. For them, the work can serve as a fruitful introduction because it lives up to its claim to be more than a biography.

Readers who seek to glean lessons about the institution will learn much about organizational, technological, and other challenges that it faced. Continuing in the trend of his previous work, *The Air Force Way of War: U.S. Tactics and Training after Vietnam* (2015), Laslie is no technological determinist. If Laslie makes less overt historiograph-

ical interventions than he has done in *Air Force Way of War*, then one might make one more explicitly for him: the birth of the air force and its early successes had less to do with the technologically driven vision and willpower of officers like Hap Arnold and more to do with the officers Arnold gathered around him who did the boring, thankless, and nameless tasks of building and organizing the air force.

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**Citation:** Heather P. Venable. Review of Laslie, Brian D. *Architect of Air Power: General Laurence S. Kuter and the Birth of the US Air Force*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 2019.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=51824>



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