
Reviewed by John Franz (Air University, Air War College)

Published on H-War (October, 2022)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

*21st Century Power: Strategic Superiority for the Modern Era* sheds new light on General Thomas S. Power (USAF) by breaking from traditional views that he was an uneducated war hawk bent on destruction. Gen. Power's insights and contributions as the second commander of Strategic Air Command (SAC) prepared the United States to engage in strategic nuclear war on a moment's notice. While many students of history see his ideas as warmongering and predispose of him as an uneducated tyrant, the book refutes these fallacies. Ziarnick offers in the introduction that, considering the generation of capable, mission-ready nuclear forces, “Curtis LeMay may have molded SAC from its infancy to adolescence, but it was Thomas Power who formed SAC into a fully mature tool of defense and statecraft” (p. 15). *21st Century Power* is a collection of his writings, as well as interviews and testimonies designed to demonstrate Gen. Power's easy-to-understand ideas on the operationalization of nuclear strategy, his superiority in critical strategic thought, and his ability to reach any audience with crafty communication techniques. Ziarnick conveys, in an extensive exposé, the depth of Gen. Power's intellect and countermands the analysis of such authors as Stephen Budianski, who wrote *Air Power: The Men, Machines, and Ideas that Revolutionized War, From Kitty Hawk to Iraq* (2005).

After developing Gen. Power's character, Ziarnick asserts the necessary reinvestigation of the once-dead doctrine of nuclear strategy in our uncertain and unstable international contemporary environment. In this “second nuclear age,” great powers will most likely confront smaller nuclear powers like Iran or North Korea in the future. Hence, the situation of strategic nuclear overmatch percolates to the forefront. In the last paragraph of the introduction Ziarnick provides that limited wars are probable, and can be won, thus nullifying the “circumstances that originally invalidated Power's views” (p. xii). In other words, it is possible to replicate the nuclear strategic dominance that SAC once enjoyed over Soviet nuclear
forces, thereby using nuclear deterrence as a mechanism for peace.

The first chapter begins with explanations of deterrence given by Thomas Schelling and Herman Kahn. Ziarnick explains Schelling's deterrence theory as a calculated balance between rational actors where the costs of nuclear war outweigh its benefits, while Kahn provides that the threat of nuclear terror will work until it fails. Kahn argues that true deterrence came from overwhelming nuclear forces that could win a war with the Soviets, who would fire the first nuclear shots. Gen. Power did not claim to support either theorist's ideas, but his writings steer unquestionably toward Kahn's idea of escalation dominance. The rest of the chapter supports this finding with a series of Gen. Power's memoranda to the SAC forces with titles like "Strategic Air Command-Its Deterrent Role" and "The Myth of Overkill."

Chapter 2 shows that Gen. Power did not go with the grain when it came to the utility of nuclear weapons. Idealist thought during the Cold War was that the nuclear weapons were wasteful because they would never be used, and if they were used it would not matter because the ensuing worldwide horror would negate the choice to use them in the first place. Gen. Power did not believe this. He pushed SAC to develop operational nuclear plans and argued that the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) was not the ultimate weapon, as many civilian strategists claimed. It was Gen. Power who oversaw the installation of ICBM sites and directed their incorporation into operational plans as an alternate method of delivery for a nuclear strike. This mixed bomber-missile force concept ensured that a Soviet nuclear strike would only partially disable a SAC response, leaving the second-strike forces and airborne alert aircraft to deal a death blow to the Soviets.

The next two chapters are transcripts of Gen. Power's testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee in 1963 and of recordings of public remarks Gen. Power gave when New York civic leaders toured SAC headquarters in 1963. He staunchly argued that nuclear peace is kept through nuclear superiority. When speaking to the civic leadership, Gen. Power used superior communication techniques, leaving SAC jargon out and speaking in plain terms. Gen. Power reinforced his defense of nuclear posture by using a deep voice that commanded attention and rarely contradicting his testimony while keeping a crowd relaxed.

The final chapter circles back to the enduring role of strategic warfare and its requisite study during the second nuclear age. Ziarnick includes one of Gen. Power's last speeches from 1964, titled "The Role of Strategic Airpower: Past, Present, and Future." Using the same Kahnian theme and nearing the end of his career, Gen. Power gave a capstone speech detailing the roots and infancy of American strategic nuclear forces through what he envisioned for their future. Power claimed that strategic nuclear forces will always be necessary for deterrence and escalation dominance, while being grounded in operational plans with ready professionals regardless of the domain in which they exist. Finally, he gave credence to the ultimate weapon, man himself, and placed the onus squarely on our freely elected leaders to maintain our strategic deterrence forces.

Readers interested in strategic deterrence, the development of nuclear forces, and SAC history will enjoy Ziarnick's compilation. Not dry like reading Clausewitz, it is a fun, informative work that provides an alternative view of Gen. Power's prowess and is highly recommended for students of the second nuclear age.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-war


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57101

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.