

BOOK REVIEWS

A Review of “The Bomber Mafia: A Dream, a Temptation, and the Longest Night of the Second World War”

Malcolm Gladwell, New York: Little, Brown, and Company (2021)

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“We live in an era when new tools and technologies and innovations emerge every day. But the only way those new technologies serve some higher purpose is if a dedicated band of believers insists that they be used to that purpose.” – *The Bomber Mafia* (p. 198)

Malcolm Gladwell, the popular non-fiction author of *The Tipping Point*, *Blink*, and *Outliers*, among other works, now sets his sight on his “obsession” with air power, as he investigates the role of strategic bombardment during World War II and the personalities and leadership of Curtis LeMay and Haywood Hansell in *The Bomber Mafia*. This print version is the result of his audio book, which was inspired by his podcast series. That such a popular author addresses a significant topic related to the Air Force—that mentions the Air Force Academy specifically (see pp. 40-45 and 128-130)—is in itself pertinent, as the story informs the greater public on an important period of Air Force history. Unfortunately, Gladwell handles this intriguing story clumsily, and he misses the larger leadership issue that should be the point of his investigation—the leadership necessary for effective innovation from stagnant practices.

Gladwell does provide a reasonable overview of the Air Force’s early history. His work introduces the public to those early Army air power advocates—the Air Force did not become a separate service until 1947—who recognized that this new technology offered a veritable panacea to the ugly battlegrounds of World War I on the entrenched Western Front. These air power proponents believed that large bombers could avoid the attrition-style warfare that occurred on the ground from 1914-1918 on the Western Front and decimated a generation of Europeans. Instead, through its professional air power school, the Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS), many of these future air power

leaders learned, developed, and embraced a strategic bombing doctrine of high altitude, precision, daylight bombing of enemy industrial targets. These air power leaders made up the “Bomber Mafia,” who supported this theory with a religious fervor. This bombing would affect the desire and ability of an enemy nation to make war. The energy of these advocates led to the creation of large bombers — the B-17, B-24, and later the B-29 —to carry out this once theoretical doctrine. Gladwell also introduces Carl Norden and his eponymous bombsight that allowed for a modicum of precision when releasing “dumb” iron bombs. The integration of these two technologies and applying the doctrine from the ACTS sets the stage for Gladwell’s discussion.

Gladwell’s emphasis is on Hansell and LeMay and their approach to strategic bombardment, specifically in the Pacific theater during late-1944 into 1945. Hansell, an early member of the Bomber Mafia and a former instructor at the ACTS, struggled with getting results while precision-bombing Japan from the Marianas Islands, as he commanded XXI Bomber Command. The problem was that the jet stream settled right over Japan—with winds in excess of 100 miles-per-hour—scattering bombs everywhere, which dismantled any attempt at precision bombing. His superiors wanted him to use new napalm munitions and to deviate from precision bombardment. Instead of focusing on precision, Army Air Force leaders pressed Hansell to use this new technology and area bombing to destroy the Japanese cities, which consisted of mostly wooden structures. Gladwell assigns Hansell as the novel moral agent—he compares the temptation Hansell faced with his faith in precision bombardment with Satan’s temptation of Jesus in the desert (p. 145)—as Hansell continues to ineffectively precision bomb the islands, even though he did accomplish some area bombing missions. Gladwell sees this as good and moral, and, given the direction of the U.S. Air Force, prescient. The service, and air power across services, has maintained its focus on dropping ordnance in a more precise manner, so that now it has highly effective precision weapons

and avoids collateral damage as much as possible. Nevertheless, Gladwell completes his story that begins in the introduction, as General Hap Arnold had his deputy, Louis Norstad, relieve the ineffective Hansell and put LeMay in charge.

Gladwell presents his argument as a black-and-white issue between two leaders and their moral character, with Hansell as the hero and LeMay as the goat. LeMay “improvised destruction” to such an extent that even other warriors could not comprehend the level of devastation wrought by air power (p. 194). Gladwell wants the reader to see Hansell as the idealist and the moralist, one who was “inflexible, a man of principle,” (p. 168) since he did not perform area bombing to the extent that LeMay did, and tried to “keep the faith” with precision bombing, as the epigraph above highlights (p. 198). But this disregards the essence of the nature of war—the violence. The longer this war continued, the more violent and nasty it was becoming. LeMay’s moral compass dictated that ending the war the soonest was the most moral approach—Gladwell states this and offers a perspective from historian Conrad Crane about how Japanese historians have agreed with this position (p. 196). Gladwell, however, places all of the negative attention on this air power operation while ignoring the naval blockade of Japan, which was slowly starving the populace. He also diminishes the impact that the American invasion on the island would have had—planned for November 1945—with American casualty estimates as high as one million (never mind the Japanese casualties), had the U.S. not firebombed and dropped the atomic weapons causing the Japanese to surrender.

The prominent point of this story is the leadership LeMay demonstrates through his open-mindedness and innovation. Gladwell does not give the credit to LeMay as being the inventive leader that he was. LeMay was a graduate from the ACTS, and was as much of a member of the “Bomber Mafia” as anyone. He had already demonstrated his unique understanding of air

power and its tactical and operational capabilities. In the European theater alone, air power advocates give him much of the credit of taking the theory of high altitude, strategic, daylight precision bombardment—unescorted—and making it work as best it could in practice. For mutual defensive support, LeMay developed the box formation that allowed for interlocking fields of fire for the B-17s and B-24s penetrating deep into the heartland of Germany. He recognized the statistical chance of an anti-aircraft artillery piece hitting an aircraft—one of every nearly-three hundred shots—and realized that bomber formations with a steady run-in to the target would lead to more effective bombing, so he trained and led his formations to do just that (p. 89). He realized that not all bombardiers were equal, so he ensured that the best element lead bombardiers were given the intelligence and time to plan effective run-ins for their bombings, and then had the other aircraft and bombardiers drop their loads based on timing from the lead aircraft. LeMay was a warrior and an intellectual.

After commanding in Europe at the group, wing, and air division levels, LeMay's first operational command in the Pacific theater was with XX Bomber Command in India, with bombers flying from there and China to hit the western littoral regions of the Japanese islands, but he requested that his command be terminated since it was ineffective and impossible to improve. Upon his arrival in the Marianas in January 1945, replacing Hansell, LeMay changed and trained his crews to most effectively take the war to the Japanese islands, which meant coming in lower with the shocking ordnance of napalm and magnesium to create firestorms. LeMay wanted to win the war as quickly as possible, and he instituted changes to make that happen.

Gladwell remarks in his preface, "Obsessives lead us astray sometimes. Can't see the bigger picture... but I don't think we get progress or innovation or joy or beauty without obsessives" (xiii). He incorrectly sees Hansell as the obsessive. But the real obsessive

was LeMay, who believed in the original doctrine more than anybody else, but was willing to innovate and change to fight a more effective and shorter war. Gladwell provides a story that more should be familiar with, however, his inadequate treatment and comparison between LeMay and Hansell, as well as his numerous inaccuracies—other reviews address this directly—makes this an interpretation one should dodge. Although this is a fast and fun read, better to find a book that offers a more nuanced understanding of personalities and events.

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