

The Arsenal of Democracy

The History of U.S. Military Vehicles
since WWII



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To Victor Davis Hanson, my maître à penser

Table of Contents

Introduction	p.5
The Greatest Generation	p.6-15
Anglo-American Alliance	p.16-18
The Axis of Evil	p.19-22
The Korean Crisis	p.23-29
The Indochina Problem	p.30-37
The Sino-Soviet Axis	p.38-40
The Persian Gulf	p.41-46
Lessons from the Past	p.47
Bibliography	p.48-53

Introduction

The year 2020 was one for the history books. America was plagued with the COVID pandemic, the George Floyd race riots, intense political polarization, and a legitimacy crisis for the presidency—all in the same year. Unfortunately, the crisis ran much deeper than the tumultuous events of a single year. For the past 30 years, the United States has seemingly been in decline. The “American Century” no longer seems an accurate term. The rise of China as a global superpower in East Asia, a revanchist Russia in Eastern Europe, and the threat of nuclearization in Korea and the Middle East are among America’s most pressing challenges in the 21st century. The post-war era of American greatness has all but disappeared, and the very definition of America has been challenged into question by extremists across—or perhaps beyond—the normal left-right political spectrum. In 2022 alone, the Russo-Ukrainian War brought the world to the brink of nuclear war, the closest in half a century since the Cuban Missile Crisis. North Korea has escalated its aggression toward the South in an almost unprecedented fashion. Meanwhile, the domestic politics of the United States, as well as some of the other Western democracies, have been plunged into an almost civil-war like situation.

The United States must not abdicate its role as the world’s leader of Western liberal democracy. Faced with the Marxist dictatorship of China, the authoritarian traditionalism of a revanchist Russia, and the nuclear ambitions of an Islamist Iran and a totalitarian North Korea, American leadership has never been more sorely needed. As the great Thomas Paine wrote almost 250 years ago, “These are the times that try men’s souls.” Now, more than ever, it is time to recall the lessons of America’s glorious history, and to renew our resolve in the defense of human freedom. In these uncertain but exciting times, I write this book for that very purpose. Confronted by these urgent global challenges, the United States is again facing a time for choosing. We must take this as an opportunity to embrace an ambitious new American agenda to win the 21st century. We need a robust foreign policy to challenge illiberal regimes abroad, while safeguarding our own democracy at home. The Russians, Chinese, North Koreans, Saudis, and Iranians will do everything in their power to export their organized terror, preying upon the innocent and butchering all dissidents. If America does not get involved, somebody else will. The choice is ours. We can stop them, and we must stop them. Failure is not an option—not for the great nation that defeated Nazism, fascism, and communism.

The Greatest Generation

It was December 6, 1941. America had just been assaulted with a surprise attack by Imperial Japan, which hoped to paralyze the United States before it could enter the war against fascism. Amid the attack, a group of B-17s were flown in from Hamilton Field, California. The Far East Air Force, stationed in the Philippines, received a surge of B-17s to defend against the Japs. General Lewis H. Bremerton ordered his bombers and fighters on various patrol missions, in accordance with Rainbow 5 war plan directives, but he was overruled by General Douglas MacArthur. Colin Kelly claimed to have crashed his B-17 into the Japanese battleship Haruna. Although this was later discovered to have been a near miss, he was celebrated as a war hero, and posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. President Roosevelt described the attack as a “day that will live in infamy,” and he announced the United States’ declaration of war against the Japanese empire. Japan had just awoken a sleeping giant. America’s industrial capacity was unparalleled. As the world’s center of manufacturing, the United States was soon at the cutting edge of the Allied war effort, quickly adjusting to wartime production and mass-producing military aircraft and tanks to defeat fascism in Europe.

Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress



In 1943, the USAAC proposed a multi-engine bomber to replace the Martin B-10. The Air Corps was looking for a bomber capable of reinforcing the air forces in Hawaii, Panama, and Alaska. Boeing’s design, the Douglas DB-1, went up against Martin’s Model 146 at the Wilbur Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio. The prototype B-17 was developed by

Edward Curtis Wells and E. Gifford Emery, and built at Boeing’s own expense. It combined features of the experimental XB-15 bomber and 247 transport. The Model 299 made its maiden flight in 1935. When Boeing’s four-engined model was shown to be better, Major General Frank Maxwell Andrews updated USAAC doctrine accordingly. Since the Model 299 crashed, it was disqualified from the competition. Malin Craig, the Army Chief of Staff, canceled the order for 65 YB-17s, and ordered 133 of the twin-engined Douglas B-18 Bolo instead. The failure of the Model 299 dashed Boeing’s hopes for a substantial bomber contract, but the B-17 design went on to become one of America’s most iconic military aircraft

during WWII. B-17s were used in the early battles of the Pacific War, such as the Battle of Coral Sea and the Battle of Midway, but not with much success. The B-17s of the 5th Air Force were tasked with disrupting Japanese sea lanes. According to Air Corps doctrine at the time, bombers were instructed to fire from high altitudes, but it was soon found that only 1% of their bombs hit the targets. From that point on, B-17s were still used at altitudes high enough to be invulnerable against most A6M Zero fighters. The B-17's greatest success in the Pacific was at the Battle of Bismarck Sea, where they eviscerated the Japanese transport ships. At their peak use in September 1942, there were 168 B-17 bombers in the Pacific. However, by mid-1942, General Henry H. Arnold had already decided that the B-17s were not well-suited to the operations of the Pacific. General Arnold made plans to replace the B-17s with B-24s, and later with B-29s. B-17s were still being used late into the Pacific War, but mostly in the combat search-and-rescue role. The Americans and British jointly led Operation Pointblank, which established air superiority in Western Europe by destroying the Nazis' preparations for a ground offensive. The USAAF bombers attacked by day, while the British bombers assaulted by night, usually against industrial cities. General Ira C. Eaker and the 8th Air Force placed high priority on decimating Germany's aircraft industry of fighter assembly plants, engine factories, and ball-bearing manufacturers. Attacks began in April 1943 against the heavily fortified industrial plants in Bremen and Recklinghausen. When the aerial bombings proved ineffective at reducing Germany's fighter strength, additional B-17s were sent in to strike at industrial targets. The 8th Air Force targeted the ball-bearing factories in Schweinfurt, hoping to cripple the war effort there. A second attempt was made on Schweinfurt, which became known as Black Thursday. The 8th Air Force suffered similar casualties on missions to Oschersleben, Halberstadt, and Brunswick. Lieutenant General James Doolittle, commander of the 8th Air Force, had ordered the second Schweinfurt mission to be canceled due to bad weather, but it was too late. The lead units had already entered the hostile air space, and they continued on with the mission. Most of the escorts either turned back or missed the rendezvous, and as a result, 60 B-17s were destroyed. Doolittle and his 8th Air Force conducted a third assault against Schweinfurt in 1944, known as Big Week. These bombing missions were directed against German aircraft production. B-17s were aided by North American P-51 Mustangs and Republic P-47 Thunderbolt fighters in the fight against Germany's aerial fighters. The B-17 proved instrumental in the bombing campaigns against Japan and Germany, paralyzing the war-making efforts of the evil empires and laying the groundwork for the Allied victory of WWII.

Consolidated B-24 Liberator



One of the casualties of Pearl Harbor was a B-24, the only aircraft of its type in Hawaii at the time. It had been used in the Central Pacific for a long-range reconnaissance mission against Imperial Japan shortly before the attack. The B-24 was designed by Consolidated Aircraft in San Diego, California. Known as the Model 32, the prototype featured a Davis wing, which gave it a high cruise speed, long range, and the

ability to carry a heavy bomb load. The first British Liberators were ordered by the Anglo-French Purchasing Board in 1940, but after the Fall of France, the orders were transferred to the UK. The Royal Air Force, along with USAAF, felt that the impending global war required new forms of air transport. The first Liberators entered RAF service in 1941. The British used B-24s to defend their colonies in Egypt and the East Indies. Liberators were used by the Allies in the early battles of the Pacific War, defending Allied territory in the Philippines, Australia, Espiritu Santo, Guadalcanal, Hawaii, and Midway Island. B-24s first entered service in the American Air Force in 1942, when they began to be used for strategic bombing campaigns until the end of WWII. Modified B-24Ds, known as carpetbaggers, were used for these missions in Europe. In 1943, at the Battle of the Atlantic, the Liberator was crucial for the Allied victory against German U-boats, which marked a turning point of WWII in favor of the Allies. By mid-1943, B-17s were phased out in favor of the longer range B-24s. By the end of WWII, the technological breakthroughs of the Boeing B-29 Superfortress left the Liberator obsolete. The B-24 was rapidly phased out of US service, although a derivative, the PB4Y-2 Privateer maritime patrol, was still in use by the Navy in the Korean War.

North American B-25 Mitchell



Major General William “Billy” Mitchell was a pioneer of American aviation, and his namesake was used for the B-25 bomber. First designed in 1939, it became one of the most prominent American military aircraft of WWII. The B-25B first came to fame for its use during the Doolittle Raid in 1942, led by Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle, who led a revenge

mission against Japan four months after the Pearl Harbor attack. Doolittle and his team first took off from the carrier USS Hornet, bombing Tokyo and four other

Japanese cities without any loss. Doolittle's aerial campaign against Imperial Japan was a major morale boost for the US, striking fear into the hearts of Axis Japan, which had previously thought their homeland was invincible to enemy forces. Although the actual damage was minor, Doolittle's invasion forced the Japanese to divert resources into defending their mainland for the remainder of the war. Under the leadership of Lieutenant General George C. Kenney, B-25s were used to ravage Japanese targets in the Southwest Pacific from 1944 to 1945. USAAF bombing campaigns were massively successful across the Central Pacific, Alaska, North Africa, the Mediterranean, and Burma theaters of the war. The majority of American B-25s were used during the Pacific War, including in the Aleutian Islands, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, New Britain, China, Burma and the island hopping campaign in the Central Pacific. Over the course of the war, it became clear that the B-25 could be used successfully for ground attacks. In Burma, it was used to sabotage Japanese communication links and bridges. The B-25 was also used to supply besieged troops at Imphal in 1944. The Chinese used B-25s for interdiction and close air support in their fight to expel their Japanese occupiers. As USAAF acquired new bases throughout the Pacific, B-25s were able to strike targets in Indochina, Formosa, and Kyushu. From Saipan, American bombers struck against Guam and Tinian. The 41st Bomb Group used the B-25 to liberate the Japanese-occupied islands which had been bypassed by the main Pacific campaign. Besides the Pacific, the Allies used the Mitchell against the ground forces of the Axis powers during the Second Battle of El Alamein in Egypt. Mitchells were also used in the North African campaign, the invasion of Sicily, and the advance up into Italy in the Strait of Messina to the Aegean Sea, where B-25s were used to conduct sea sweeps as part of the coastal air forces. The Allies used the B-25 to strike down roads and rails in Italy, Austria, and the Balkans, disrupting the communications of the Axis regimes.

Boeing B-29 Superfortress



In September 1941, USAAF began planning for potential war against Japan and Germany, proposing the use of the B-29 for operations against the Nazis in Egypt. From 1942 to 1943, the US Air Force decided to transfer the B-29 to the Pacific theater, where it was used in the later stages of WWII. Pledging assistance to the

Chinese, President Roosevelt announced Operation Matterhorn, which deployed B-29s to attack the Japanese from bases in southern China and India. With the assistance of the Superfortress, American forces invaded Saipan in June 1944.

The Japanese responded with a counterattack, which escalated into the Battle of the Philippine Sea. After heavy fighting on land, the Americans managed to liberate Saipan by July. Operations followed in Guam and Tinian, with all three islands being liberated by August. The greatest significance of the B-29 is that it was modified to carry atomic weapons. The Enola Gay, flown by Paul Tibbets, dropped the first bomb, called the Little Boy, on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. The Bockscar, piloted by Major Charles W. Sweeney, dropped the second bomb, called Fat Man, on Nagasaki three days later. When the stubborn Japanese Empire finally surrendered, B-29s saw further use for supplying food to Japanese POWs. In September 1945, after defeating the Japanese, the B-29 was used for celebratory long-distance flights by Generals Barney M. Giles, Curtis LeMay, and Emmett O'Donnell Jr. The Japanese Empire had finally been subdued. After WWII, the B-29 also saw some limited use in the Korean War, where it was used in strategic day-bombing campaigns against North Korea's industrial centers.

Convair B-36 Peacemaker



Fears of a German blitz against Britain, the American Air Corps quickly designed the B-36 shortly before America's entry into WWII. In April 1939, the famed Chalmers Lindbergh convinced General Henry H. Arnold to produce a new bomber in large numbers to counter Germany's bomber production.¹ In December 1939,

the Air Corps issued a formal specification for a so-called "superbomber" that could deliver 20,000 lbs of bombs to a target 2,667 miles at a speed of 400 mph.² USAAC sought to create an intercontinental bomber that would rival the German Reichsluftfahrtministerium's ultra-range Amerikabomber program, which was described in a 33-page proposal by Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering on May 12, 1942. As the Pacific War progressed, the USAAF increasingly saw the need for long-range bombers that could reach Japan from America's bases in Hawaii. Henry L. Stimson, the Secretary of War, waived the normal procedures to expedite the process of making such a bomber. Three months after the Victory in Europe Day in 1945, the B-36 was unveiled, and it flew for the first time in 1946. After the establishment of an independent US Air Force in 1947, the Cold War began with the Berlin Airlift in 1948. When the Soviets tested their first atomic bomb in 1949, American military planners scrambled to develop a new generation of bombers that could carry the heavy atomic bombs. The B-36 was the only American aircraft with the range and payload to reach the USSR. Since it was piston-powered,

1. Arthur Herman 2012, pp. 289–291

2. David Willis 2007, pp. 136–137.