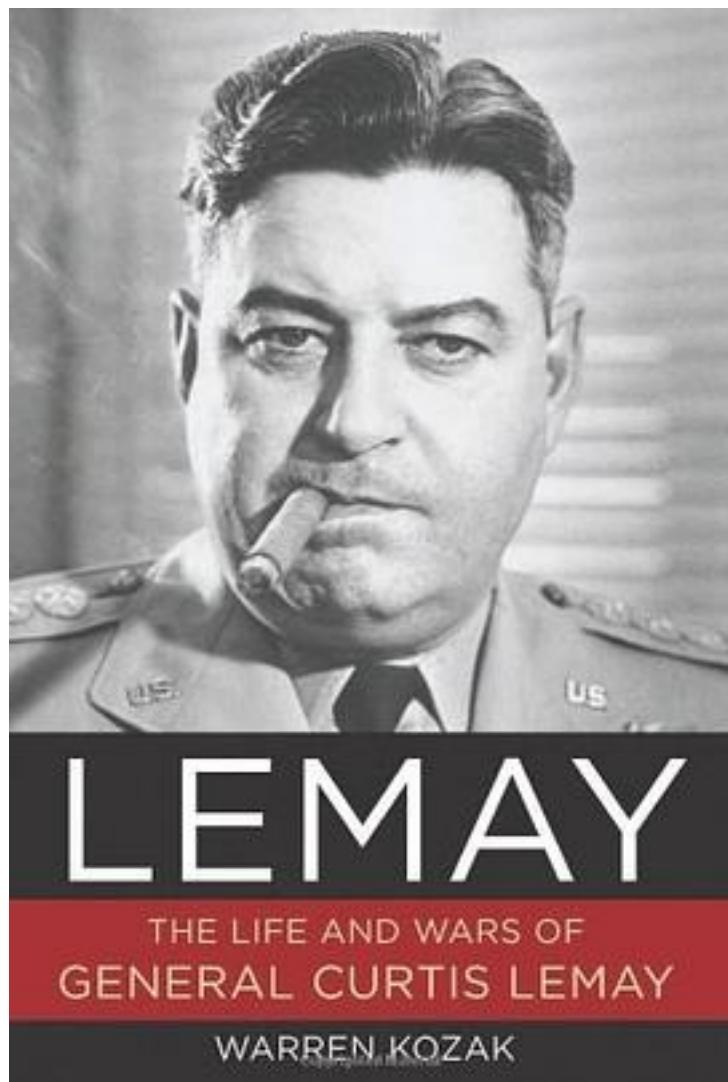


LeMay



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著者:Warren Kozak

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Warren Kozak's new biography is not meant to hide LeMay's abrasiveness and absence of tact. And he does not claim that his revisionist account is the last word about the controversial general, or that he has unearthed radically new information. Rather, Kozak's achievement in this engaging portrait is to have provided a twofold reminder.

First, like him or not, Curtis LeMay's brilliance and expertise saved thousands of American lives during World War II, helped to shorten the war, and then restored the American strategic deterrence that was essential in keeping the peace during the Cold War.

Second, the larger LeMay paradox is an old one in American military history: peace-loving democratic peoples fear fiery warriors in times of calm as much as they clamor for them in extremis. Those whom we applaud in wartime, we usually damn later during peace. So it was with LeMay, who graced the cover of Time magazine and, by the end of World War II, was a national icon....

Kozak does a good job of uncovering the studious and thoroughly professional side of LeMay, one that belies his image as an out-of-control saber-rattler. Even before World War II, he was a flight engineer and an astute navigator, pioneering long-range navigation techniques on the new B-17 bomber.

LeMay was the longest-serving general in our history, and the youngest to reach four-star rank. President Kennedy was no fan of LeMay, but astutely appointed him to the Joint Chiefs, remarking, "I like having LeMay at the head of the Air Force. Everybody knows how he feels. That's a good thing right now." And even LeMay's perennial liberal foe, Robert McNamara, once concluded that Lemay -- his former wartime boss -- was "the finest military strategist the nation has ever produced."

What are we left with, then, in assessing Curtis E. LeMay? Kozak suggests a tragedy of sorts. LeMay grew up in an age when public-relations ability was largely irrelevant in comparison with personal courage and proven expertise. LeMay's approach -- a combination of reticence and occasional blunt talk about victory at any cost -- privileged action over rhetoric; it was perfectly suited for the conventional struggle of World War II, and even to the frightening, but far more complex, early years of the Cold War....

Yet LeMay's competence and honesty were never questioned. He did not cash in -- as so many have since -- by hawking superfluous new weaponry to former subordinates in the Pentagon. LeMay would rather have perished than have changed to facilitate new doctrines of limited war and faith in international peace-keeping organizations. In this sympathetic biography, Warren Kozak lets facts about LeMay speak for themselves and reminds us why one of our greatest soldiers is today hardly recognized.

In short, the LeMay DNA was almost divinely engineered for America's ordeal between 1930 and 1960. When that era passed -- and passed without Armageddon, thanks, in large part, to a few brilliant and courageous warriors like LeMay -- we were to be done with him as well.

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