



Part I-From Sun Tzu to LeMay: How Doctrine Became Airpower's Backbone

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LeMay Center Air Force Doctrine Development

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, Ala. -- The LeMay Center is highlighting doctrine through a 6-part outreach series dedicated to cultivating how Airmen understand and receive Air Force Doctrine, and how doctrine truly guides the fight as our service-wide warfighting language, aligning decisions and execution across the force that deliver national defense priorities.

The hallway outside the archive is ordinary: painted walls, fluorescent light, the clean hush of an institution at work. A newly selected doctrine professional arrives with the quiet posture of someone who has lived inside operational tempo. The uniform is crisp, but the eyes carry the memory of compressed timelines and decisions made without perfect information. The guide, an older civilian with the calm of a person who has watched generations rotate through crisis and return, does not waste words on ceremony. He turns the lock of the archive with a deliberate finality, then pauses with his hand on the handle.

"Doctrine isn't paperwork," he says. "It's pre-combat decision advantage."

The phrase lands without flourish. It is not offered as inspiration. It is delivered as fact.

When the door opens, the air changes. Not in a theatrical way, but in the way old rooms feel different, cooler, drier, patient. The light inside is softer than the hallway, diffused over rows of shelves filled with binders, archived drafts, annotated pages, and neatly labeled publications. Here, war is not remembered through medals or photographs. It is remembered through language, disciplined, argued, and refined, until it becomes usable under pressure.

A single binder rests on a table in the center of the room, more worn than the others. It is not ornate. There is no mystique engineered into it. Yet it draws attention like an object that has been handled by people who understand consequences. The guide places two fingers on its cover, as if anchoring the moment, then opens it to a page marked in block letters:

THE LONG THREAD

What follows is not a lecture. It is a lineage.

The story begins far from airfields and runways, before the sky became a domain anyone could command. It began in the ancient world, where conflict was already complex, already human, already shaped by fear and misperception. In that era, a strategist stood beneath lantern light and wrote with a clarity that has survived centuries of technological change: war is won before battle through understanding, planning, and the disciplined shaping of advantage.

Sun Tzu's ideas did not offer comfort. They offered control: of self, of formation, of perception, of time. He reduced chaos to principles that could travel across generations, across geography, across the shifting shapes of violence. He understood what modern professionals recognize instinctively: machines do not win wars on their own. Minds do. Structure does. Shared understanding does.

Doctrine grows out of that same truth. It is not a script meant to replace judgment. It is guidance designed to support judgment when the clock is unforgiving and the enemy is moving. It gives a force a common language, a repeatable way to think, a disciplined baseline that enables initiative rather than smothering it.

And inside that ancient clarity sits a quiet, subliminal message to any adversary watching closely: the Air Force is not just superbly equipped, it is organized to decide. It is trained to think faster than shock can disrupt. It is built so that uncertainty does not become paralysis.

Centuries pass. Empires rise and fall. Industry reshapes the world. Then humanity breaks the boundary of the sky, and war follows it upward with predatory speed. Airpower arrives as both promise and disruption, a new dimension with no established playbook, only urgent questions and competing visions.

In the interwar years, Giulio Douhet studies the emerging domain like a man staring into a storm system. He imagines airpower reaching beyond armies and fronts, striking strategic centers of gravity, shaping will, disrupting production, collapsing the enemy's

ability to continue. His ideas are bold, sometimes severe, but unmistakably focused on one objective: identifying what matters most and applying force decisively.

Across the Atlantic, Billy Mitchell refuses to let the future remain theoretical. He demands proof. He provokes institutions that are comfortable with old assumptions, pressing them to see that the sky can change the geometry of conflict. Mitchell is not remembered for gentle persuasion. He is remembered for collision, between innovation and tradition, between necessity and inertia.

Between Douhet's visionary theory and Mitchell's insistence on demonstration, doctrine begins to evolve into its modern form. War itself becomes the validator. Ideas that cannot survive operational reality fracture and fall away. Ideas that endure are refined and absorbed, no longer as speculation, but as best practice shaped by the cost of learning.

The lesson is stark: doctrine is not a museum of opinions. It is the distilled residue of hard experience. It is what remains standing after reality has taken its toll.

And it offers another message, steady and unmistakable, to potential adversaries: the Air Force does not worship novelty. It interrogates it. It tests it. It refuses to confuse technology with advantage. Because advantage is not a platform, it is a practiced way of employing power with discipline, coherence, and speed.

Then the thread reaches the post-World War II era, where airpower is no longer a speculative instrument. It is a proven necessity, an arena where mistakes echo on a national scale. The question becomes not whether airpower matters, but whether it can be generated, sustained, and directed with uncompromising reliability.

General Curtis LeMay appears in this narrative not as a ceremonial figure, but as a force of institutional gravity. His reputation is often described in terms of toughness and demand. But the deeper legacy is structural. LeMay does not accept a force that can fight only when conditions are favorable. He demands a system that can produce combat power repeatedly, through standards, training, readiness culture, and disciplined execution.

He treats readiness as an obligation, not a mood. He treats competence as something that must be engineered into the institution, planned, executed, measured, and reinforced until it becomes reflex. Mistakes will be made but they will be corrected and learned from. Under LeMay's influence, airpower becomes not only a capability, but a repeatable practice. The Air Force learns that excellence must be scalable, and discipline must hold even when the environment does not.

This is the hinge, where doctrine's role becomes unmistakable. If a force intends to operate at speed, at scale, and under pressure, it must share a common warfighting language. It must codify what works. It must teach it. It must demand it. Not to reduce leaders into automatons, but to free them, so they can spend their judgment on what is truly necessary instead of rebuilding fundamentals during crisis.

LeMay's imprint leaves behind a subtle deterrent truth: the Air Force is not improvisational by nature. It is practiced. It is trained to execute with coherence. It does not arrive in conflict as an experiment. It arrives as a disciplined instrument of national power.

The guide turns another page in the binder. The names, Sun Tzu, Douhet, Mitchell, LeMay, do not disappear. They settle into the foundation like bedrock, supporting everything built above them. The story quickly moves from nostalgia to inheritance, with responsibilities attached.

Legacy is only useful if it's alive. Enter the "engine room".

That is why the room exists. Not as a shrine, but as an engine. Doctrinal perspectives are preserved here not to be admired, but to be sharpened, continuously updated, debated, refined, and made ready for the next fight. The shelves are not storage. They are the record of disciplined adaptation: drafts with tracked changes, margins filled with argument, publications revised because the world did not stand still.

The new selectee notices the pattern: doctrine is less like a book and more like a living system. It captures the best of what experience has proven, and it remains open to revision because tomorrow's conflict will punish complacency.

The guide closes the binder with care and precision.

"This," he says, letting the silence hold for a moment, "is how the Air Force keeps its thinking ahead of the fight."

Then he lifts a newer folder, clean pages, modern headers, a draft that is still becoming.

"Next," he says, "is how doctrine is written today, how it is coordinated across the force, published, and kept honest."

The door remains open behind them, and the hallway light spills in like a reminder that doctrine does not belong only in archives, on shared drives or in computer hard drives. It belongs in units. In planning cells. In cockpits. In operations centers. In the hands of Airmen who will not have time to debate fundamentals when the enemy forces the issue.

The long thread continues, pulled taut across centuries, strengthened by war, and carried forward with a simple promise: the Air Force will not be surprised into confusion. It will meet the future with disciplined clarity, and it will guide the fight.

Ready to go deeper? Explore the full library of Air Force doctrine, tools, and updates, then put it to work in your mission. Visit doctrine.af.mil to continue the study.