

Nuclear Age Insights: Discussions with General Larry Welch

Michael O. Wheeler (mwheeler@ida.org)

In 2016 as part of its 60th anniversary celebration, the Institute for Defense Analyses produced an oral history of the nuclear age based on the experiences and reflections of General Larry Welch, a past president of IDA. This oral history provides a unique window into the Cold War and the nuclear age – their past, present, and future.

General Welch's career spanned these eras. Beginning his career in 1953 as a fighter pilot, he eventually served as Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force (1984), Commander of Strategic Air Command (1985), and Air Force Chief of Staff (1986). After retirement, he joined IDA in 1991 as president.

General Welch's time in uniform and his participation in a number of senior advisory groups and almost every senior-level study or review of nuclear operations, command and control, the nuclear enterprise, missile defense, and related subjects like space and cyberspace provide him a singular perspective, which he shares in an informal discussion setting recorded in June 2016. He not only provides insights based on his wide range of experiences, but also relates personal anecdotes on figures like General Curtis LeMay and Soviet Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev. Not only is this a unique historical record, but it also is relevant to a number of issues facing the United States and its allies today.

The seven-hour oral history is divided into seven parts:

Part 1: Biography and Involvement with Strategic Air Command and Nuclear Arms Control

- Strategic Air Command
- Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff and Nuclear Targeting
- Strategic Forces
- Nuclear Operations
- Deterrence
- Nuclear Arms Control

Part 2: The Cold War's End and Beyond

- INF
- Marshal Akhromeyev and the JCS
- The Challenges of Monitoring Arms Control
- The Strategic Triad
- Costs and Timelines for Force Development and Deployment
- Offense-Defense Calculations for Nuclear Forces
- The Nuclear Enterprise and Sustaining Nuclear Weapons



Part 3: The Cold War's End and Beyond

- Strategic/Global Command
- Nuclear Testing
- Force Management
- Nuclear Abolition
- Space and Cyberspace
- Precision Strike

Part 4: The Cold War's End and Beyond

- Proliferation
- Missile Defense
- Weapons of Mass Destruction
- The Value of Advisory Committees
- Deterrence and the Pace of Change

Part 5: Cycling Back to the Beginning of the Cold War

- The Manhattan Project
- Hiroshima and Nagasaki
- Nuclear Deterrence and Warfighting
- NATO
- Theater Nuclear Forces
- Escalation Control

Part 6: The Cold War's End and Beyond

- Understanding Adversaries
- The Fall of the Soviet Union
- The Problem with a Win/Lose Mindset
- Asian-Pacific Issues
- China
- Looking Back on Vietnam

Part 7: Conclusions and Thinking About the Future

The entire playlist is available at idalink.org/GenWelch-Insights.