

# General Curtis LeMay Role Sheet

In this trial, you will play the role of General Curtis LeMay. It is very important that you understand your character. You will be subject to questioning that will require you to creatively answer questions while staying in character.

You were born on November 15, 1906, to Erving and Arizona LeMay in Columbus, Ohio. Your dad was a handyman who was often unemployed. Your family was very poor. Being the oldest child in the family, you shared the responsibility of providing as the family followed your father from one job to another.

Once, your dad moved the entire family to Montana, where you lived in a shack in subzero winter temperatures while he served as a handyman for a local park. At age eight, you fished through the ice for trout to help feed your family, which included you and five siblings. Your next stop was California. The family was moved from one tenement building to another while your father continued to get and lose jobs. Eventually you ended up back where you started, in Columbus, Ohio. After completing high school, you attended Ohio State University, working your way through school at a factory and joining the ROTC program, eventually graduating with a degree in civil engineering.



Photograph, *Somewhere in China, General Joseph W. Stilwell talking with Major General Curtis E. LeMay of the 20<sup>th</sup> Bomber command, at a B-29 base, October 11, 1944, Library of Congress (LC-USZ62-132808).*

You were accepted into flight school as the U.S. Army Air Corps was beginning to grow. You had always been drawn to planes from your earliest days, and became a talented pilot. You were commissioned as a pilot in January 1930, and in 1934 you married Helen Maitland who would remain your wife for the rest of your life. You were one of the first pursuit pilots to get specialized training in aerial navigation.

When the United States entered World War II, you were rapidly promoted and put in charge of the 350<sup>th</sup> Bombing Group, Eighth Air Force, stationed in Great Britain. A creative commander, you developed a new method for bombing, which dramatically reduced the number of planes shot down while improving the accuracy of bombing.

The men called you "Old Iron Pants." You meticulously planned missions to help reduce casualties, and flew on each mission on the lead plane, putting your own life at risk. You walked around with a cigar in your mouth. When you got angry (which was often), you would clinch the cigar in your teeth in a menacing manner, becoming quite a character in the process. You believed in constantly training your men so that in the chaos of battle and they would be more likely to walk out alive. Your men grew to respect and love you in spite of your crusty demeanor.

You introduced and developed the P-51 Mustang fighter plane to escort the bombers. You were promoted to Brigadier General, the youngest in the U.S. Army Air Force, because you got results. By the time you left the European Theater, the American Allied air campaign, based around your innovative strategies, significantly limited German industrial capacity and their ability to wage war.

## General Curtis LeMay Role Sheet cont.

In Europe, you witnessed the devastating impact of the British mass "terror bombing" of Hamburg, Germany. In response to the Blitz on London, the British responded with their own night raids. In spite of the effectiveness of such tactics, you preferred daytime bombing of military targets to improve accuracy.

In August 1944, U.S. Army Air Corps General "Hap" Arnold reassigned you to the China-Burma-India Theater. General Arnold had pushed the government to develop a massive long range bomber, the B-29 Superfortress. It was much bigger than the B-17 Flying Fortress and could carry a larger bomb payload. Developing the plan cost \$3 billion. General Arnold sent you to India to fix the mechanical issues to increase bombing accuracy. You succeeded, and results improved.

In January 1945, you were placed in charge of the air campaign over Japan. Marine victories in the Marianas established landing strips for the B-29s on Saipan and Tinian. General Haywood Hansell's bombers were struggling to achieve results. You analyzed the situation and noted four major problems with the strategy:

- Bombers flew at high altitude, where cloud cover made precision targeting very difficult;
- The powerful jet stream made it very difficult for planes to stay on target;
- Constant mechanical problems increased casualty rates; and
- The Japanese had learned from the German example and decentralized their industry throughout the major cities. Reports claim that some industrial equipment was moved to people's homes and backyards so civilian homes became part of the factory system.

Your response to these challenges was to lead a campaign of mass incendiary bombing. The planes would fly at a much lower altitude (much easier on their engines), and try to catch Japanese air defenses off guard.

A surprise night attack on Tokyo on March 9, 1945, devastated the city. Fire tornadoes swept around the city, killing over 100,000 people in the single deadliest raid of the war. Soon you were targeting cities all over Japan with incendiary bombs, causing massive damage and severely crippling Japan's war industries.

Morale in the U.S. Army Air Forces and back home improved. Your picture was on the cover of *Time* magazine. Facing this destruction, the Japanese refused the surrender. Horrific battles raged on Iwo Jima and Okinawa. American commanders dreaded the upcoming invasion of Japan.



Photograph, *Colonel Curtis LeMay officially congratulates a bomber crew of the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group in front of their B-17 Flying Fortress, February 6, 1943, Roger Freeman Collection, American Air Museum in Britain (FRE 4378).*

## General Curtis LeMay Role Sheet cont.

When asked, you told General Arnold that by November you could level every major Japanese city. You continued, but were required to divert some of B-29s to mine the waters around Japan for the Navy. Later you realized the mining created an effective blockade of Japan, cutting off almost all shipping and starving the Japanese people dependent on imported food.

Following President Roosevelt's death, President Harry S. Truman authorized the testing of a new weapon in the New Mexico desert. The atomic bomb was the last attempt to secure a Japanese surrender.

As you continued firebombing Japanese cities, criticism mounted over the large numbers of civilian casualties. You were ordered to drop warning leaflets encouraging Japanese civilians to evacuate cities.

The atomic bombs were assembled on the island of Tinian and your crews delivered them to their targets, with devastating effect. Tens of thousands died in the blasts and from the after effects of the radiation. The incredible destructive power of the atomic bomb drops on Hiroshima and Nagasaki changed warfare forever.

With all hope for a negotiated peace gone, Japan formally surrendered to the United States on September 2, 1945. You visited Japan after the surrender and saw firsthand the deadly effect of your campaigns. You also noticed that spread throughout the residential neighborhoods were burned out pieces of industrial manufacturing equipment, confirming intelligence reports.

After the war, you were assigned to head up a defense contractor in California to help the newly formed U.S. Air Force (which became an independent branch of the military in 1947) incorporate rocket and missile technology captured from the Nazis. After playing a role in the Berlin Airlift, you became the commander of Strategic Air Command, the branch of the Air Force responsible for delivering nuclear weapons against the enemy in the event of a nuclear war.

In the Korean War, incendiary bombs (such as napalm) were used to great effect against enemy land forces. You became the Air Force Chief of Staff in 1961. You clashed with President John F. Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis, advocating air strikes and an invasion of Cuba.

Under President Lyndon B. Johnson, you developed the Rolling Thunder Campaign to cut North Vietnamese supply lines along the Ho Chi Minh trail in Vietnam, using incendiary weapons. You clashed repeatedly with President Johnson and his Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, over the strategy of the war. You wanted to expand the bombing campaign to all of the major cities and ports in North Vietnam, which you saw as the only real way to win the war. Johnson and McNamara refused, wanting to concentrate the war in South Vietnam and avoid Chinese intervention.



Photograph, B-29s dropping bombs over Japan, c. 1945, National Park Service.

# General Curtis LeMay Role Sheet cont.

In 1965, you retired from the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

You declined offers to run for office after your retirement, until you accepted the vice presidential nomination of George Wallace's segregationist American Independent Party in 1968.

You lost the election to Richard Nixon, and your association with a virulent racist like George Wallace destroyed your reputation and tarred your legacy. Many called you racist, despite your ardent support of President Truman's 1948 decision to desegregate the military.

President Richard Nixon used your strategy of firebombing North Vietnamese cities to bring the Vietnam War to an end on American terms.

Now it is 1970. There are some important considerations as you prep for the trial:

- You must "be in character" and do your best to say only what General Curtis LeMay would say from his point of view.
- Your biggest weakness is your seeming lack of care for civilian lives in the advocating for the use of incendiary bombing and nuclear weapons and your association with racism. Defend these positions using evidence from above.
- You will be questioned by the defense team of lawyers for the United States. They are on your side, and you should work with them and help them present the American side of the case. Speak in advance. Remember, they cannot "lead a witness." They should prepare for what you will likely encounter on cross examination.
- You do not want to be impeached (contradict yourself) on the stand during the trial because this will destroy your credibility as a witness. When you and the U.S. lawyers lay out the case for the United States in your direct testimony, be careful not to contradict statements you made. Be careful what you say on cross examination, where Japanese lawyers will try to tear your testimony apart. If you stay in character, you stand a much better chance of avoiding impeachment.
- Have fun with this role and be creative. Do some independent research to make it as realistic as possible. You will get additional points on the grade rubric if you do this.

## Pre-Trial Assignment: General Curtis LeMay

In preparation for the mock trial, you need to understand your role sheet. You will research Curtis LeMay's life and find at three to five quotes that you can use as part of your testimony.

You are allowed one sheet of paper to use during the trial. Include key notes about LeMay's life as well as three to five quotes that you can use during your testimony.

*Hint:* Work with the defense team to plan out how you are going to answer their questions.

### Sources:

Kozak, Warren. *LeMay: The Life and Wars of General Curtis LeMay*. New York: Regnery Publishing, 2009.

Tillman, Barret. *LeMay: A Biography. Great Generals Series*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007.