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NEBRASKA WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

THE COLD WAR COMES TO LINCOLN:  
THE LINCOLN AIR FORCE BASE, 1952-1966

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO

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COLD WAR ESSAY CONTEST

BY  
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## Introduction

*This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence -- economic, political, even spiritual -- is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society.*

*– Dwight D. Eisenhower, January 17, 1961*

The city of Lincoln had a close relationship with the rise of military air power in the middle of the twentieth century. During the Second World War it provided training facilities for thousands of Army Air Force mechanics and pilots. After the war it provided a home for a Naval Reserve air station and a fighter squadron of the Air National Guard. Most significantly, from 1952 to 1966 it served as an important Strategic Air Command Bomber Base home to an Air Division of over six thousand Air Force personnel equipped with ninety Boeing B-47 jet bombers and a squadron of Atlas intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Forty years later, evidence of the existence of the base in Lincoln has almost completely disappeared. The runways are still used by the Lincoln Municipal Airport, obscuring the fact that commercial airliners once shared those runways with a nuclear strike force. Only the names of General Arnold Elementary School and the Arnold Heights housing development on the northwest side of Lincoln betray the connection to the United States Air Force. Even the name Air Park, given to the industrial and business park built on what was once air base land does not immediately give away its former military purpose.

And yet the story of the Lincoln Air Force Base is worth preserving. It is in many ways a microcosm of the cold war that was being waged during its existence and shows how one community

approached its role in the Cold War in much the same way that it approached its role in the Second World War. It is a story of how local political leadership overcame numerous obstacles to bring the Air Force back to Lincoln. It was a process that meant working with the Department of Defense and the United States Congress to find a balance between the necessity of a cold war military build up and post Second World War economic conservatism. It also required local leadership to bring together many competing interests in the city and keep them focused on one goal, reactivating the air base.

It is also a story of economic opportunity and growth for Lincoln. Many local businesses won contracts during the construction of the air base. Many more benefited from the arrival of over six thousand air force personnel and their families. All this was going on while the city was experiencing the beginnings of the postwar economic boom that swept across the United States.

It is the story of how Lincoln acted on its patriotic feelings and its cold war fears by embracing the air base and its personnel. It shows a community inviting the personnel of the air base to become an important part of the city's life and likewise participating in the life and culture of the Air Force. It also illustrates how Lincoln sometimes had to struggle with its own prejudices as it sought to integrate the air force into city life.

Finally, it is the story of a country ready for war. It is about the latest in airplane technology, nuclear weapons, civil defense drills, overseas deployments, war scares and the loss of life in the line of duty.

### **Reactivation of the Lincoln Air Force Base**

By the beginning of the 1950's, many of the same issues that had existed at the beginning of the Second World War were again felt by the Air Force. A program for the expansion of the total number of operational wings was put in place in response to the increasing threat posed by the Soviet Union. In addition, the outbreak of the Korean War resulted in increased military spending and multiplied the tasks assigned to the Strategic Air Command (SAC). Not only did SAC have to

prepare to wage nuclear war in the skies over the Soviet Union, it also had to provide bomber wings to support United Nations forces in the conflict. Thus the need for more bases to accommodate an Air Force that planned to expand to 143 operational combat wings by 1955, with 57 of those wings belonging to SAC.<sup>i</sup>

To support its mission of strategic deterrence, SAC needed bases to disperse its bomber force in the interior of the United States, where they would have sufficient warning time to prevent a Soviet surprise attack. From these bases, they would need to be able to deploy to forward air bases in the northern United States or overseas. When evaluating a location, a number of specific criteria could weigh in its favor. Existing active or inactive bases were to be used whenever possible. This included deactivated Second World War bases, which were available in abundance. Other criteria included:

- a sufficient amount of land to accommodate a 15,000-foot long runway for the heavy bombers that SAC was planning to deploy
- the existence of a nearby civilian community to provide housing and services for the airmen and their families
- freedom from non-military uses that might interfere with the health and security of the base population
- absence of overcrowded skies that would create hazardous flying conditions
- support from the local population

Other criteria would be developed over the course of this process, but these were the issues that would most affect the decision to bring two bomber wings to Lincoln in the early 1950's<sup>ii</sup>

News of the Air Force's interest in returning to Lincoln broke in January 1951. The Air Force was in the process of surveying former army airfields, including the network of Second World War training facilities that stretched across Nebraska. While several cities in the state were hopeful that the Air Force would return, Lincoln received the best news when Nebraska's Senator Kenneth Wherry indicated that the capital city's old base was under consideration for reactivation.<sup>iii</sup>

Seeking military investment in the city was not new to the leaders of Lincoln. The city had lobbied successfully to bring a Naval Reserve Air Station to Lincoln in 1948 that now shared the former Lincoln Army Air Field with the Municipal Airport, the Army National Guard, and the Air National Guard.<sup>iv</sup> In January 1951, Representatives of the Lincoln Housing Authority and the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce scheduled a meeting with Lt. General Curtis LeMay at SAC headquarters in Omaha, which had been made responsible for surveying the former bases in Nebraska due to its proximity. They brought with them a written presentation describing how Lincoln could help the Air Force. The report emphasized the experience Lincoln gained from providing services for the Lincoln Army Air Field during the Second World War by working with such organizations as the USO, the hospital clearinghouse, the civil defense council, the Urban League, and the Red Cross. The message they took to General LeMay, according to Harold H. Hinds of the chamber's aviation committee, was that "we did it before and we can do it again."<sup>v</sup>

Despite the optimism displayed by city officials, the road to reactivation was not a smooth one. A number of obstacles would have to be overcome before the Air Force would commit to Lincoln. One of the most difficult issues posed by reactivation was what to do with the tenants that were currently using the land and facilities of the Second World War era airfield. The list of tenants included the US Naval Reserve, the Army National Guard, the Air National Guard, commercial and private civil aviation as well as warehouses and some manufacturing. Some, like the Naval Reserve units, were problems that had to be solved by the Defense Department and the United States Congress. Other tenants, like the Guard units, generated discussion among the Defense Department and state and local officials. The fate of civil aviation in Lincoln involved a grass roots effort by the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce and local businesses to clear the path for reactivation of the air base.

Much to their frustration, city leaders were primarily observers in the debate over how to relocate the Naval Reserve. The Air Force emphasized in meetings with local officials that the relocation was strictly a Department of Defense issue. If the air base were reactivated, the Navy would move out and the Department of Defense would pay for it. If the air base were not reactivated,



the Navy would remain. It was not a make or break deal that the city had to concern itself with. Some people locally believed the city should try hard to keep the Navy from moving elsewhere. But most considered an active air force base worth the cost of losing the Naval Reserve.<sup>vi</sup>

In the end the United States Congress resolved the problem. Initially balking at the \$3.5 million dollar cost of moving the Naval Reserve units to Omaha, Congress would only agree to pay for building new Naval Reserve facilities on what would become the southeastern edge of the airbase.<sup>vii</sup> Ultimately, cuts in federal defense spending resolved the issue. Lincoln's Naval Air Station was deactivated and the Navy's facilities were then taken over by its next-door neighbor on the base, the Air National Guard.<sup>viii</sup>

Moving the National Guard facilities was not as difficult. The Air Force and the State of Nebraska agreed to move the Army National Guard to another location in Lincoln. The only issue was finding enough money to complete the task. Eventually, Congress supplied the \$800,000 to build a new armory. The Air National Guard remained on base, moving to the southeastern corner. The Air Guard was provided with administrative buildings, hangers and a parking apron. The new facilities were authorized in 1955 and completed by 1956.<sup>ix</sup>

The second major issue involved the city of Lincoln and civil aviation. Lincoln officials and the Air Force agreed early on that commercial aviation could share runways with the Air Force. The Air Force simply wanted the commercial facilities moved to a location away from the site on the north side of the air base. Its concern was strictly for security and safety reasons, but the move required an important concession for Lincoln as the city was growing rapidly and civil aviation traffic through the city was growing with it. Many local business leaders were adamant that the reactivation of the air base should not limit the growth of local air service.<sup>x</sup>

Fortunately, the city had a business community with deep pockets that was behind the effort to bring the Air Force to Lincoln. The city had \$200,000 in an airport fund and planned to raise an additional \$300,000 to pay for a new airport terminal and other commercial aviation facilities. The

pledge campaign was quickly underway and easily surpassed its goal by raising \$400,000 from Lincoln businesses both large and small. The additional funds were used to lease and expand Union Airport, a nearby private facility that became home to the 250 to 300 private civilian aircraft that landed in Lincoln every month.<sup>xi</sup>

With the relocation of National Guard and Reserve units in motion and homes found for commercial and civil aviation, the voters of Lincoln now had their say. The initial 25-year lease between the Air Force and the city was lengthened to 99 years, a change that required a public vote. In a significant show of public support the voters approved the change by a count of 8,040 to 2,642.<sup>xii</sup>

### **The Housing Problem**

With reactivation of in motion, planners faced the problem of where to put the approximately 6,000 officers and airmen and their families that would be coming to Lincoln. The Air Force had already identified appropriate housing as an important issue in retaining highly trained personnel.<sup>xiii</sup> Single airmen needed more privacy than that provided by the traditional open bay barracks that housed as many as 36 men in a room. Families needed quality homes at more affordable prices than were generally available. In the postwar United States, Lincoln was only one of many cities that had a housing shortage before the Air Force showed up. It is no surprise that when the Air Force did move into town rents for decent housing could quickly rise above the price range a typical airmen could afford. To solve the problem, the Air Force built its own facilities, beginning with new dormitory style housing made up of twenty-seven wood frame dormitories housing to house enlisted men and four similarly constructed bachelor officer's quarters (BOQ's).<sup>xiv</sup> Unlike open bay barracks these buildings offered airmen much more privacy. Each room, home to no more than three men, had a private sink and medicine cabinet, a closet with steel drawers instead of footlockers, and combination storm windows with venetian blinds. Each floor also had a washroom with an automatic

washing machine and a telephone booth. A day room on each floor provided recreation space and was furnished out of unit funds contributed by the airmen. The layout of rooms in the BOQ's was similar to that in the enlisted dormitories, but provided a higher level of privacy. Officers with the rank of Major or higher had a private room and bath, while lower ranking officers had a private room but shared a bath.<sup>xv</sup>

The second step was to provide family housing on base, built by private developers, but owned and managed by the Air Force. This provided quality housing for Air Force personnel at prices the Air Force could control. Local real estate developers were not thrilled at the prospect of competing with the Air Force. The Lincoln Builder's Association feared the Lincoln housing market would become saturated and thus have a harmful impact on the local economy if the Air Force went through with its plan for base housing.<sup>xvi</sup>

The Air Force overcame such objections by citing their housing as a necessary security precaution, likely to have little impact on local rents. The air base was relatively isolated from the city. Much of the new housing being built in the city was going up on the east side of town – far away from the air base. Personnel living in these locations would have a commute of many miles to reach the base, which would cause a problem in an emergency. The Air Force wanted a housing development only a few minutes away for personnel who were critical to flight operations. Confronting such a rationale, city officials supported the building of air base housing in what later became known as Arnold Heights. The first four hundred units were built under the Wherry Military Housing Act of 1949 and consisted of ranch style homes named after former Nebraska Senator Kenneth Wherry. Later the Air Force built a six hundred-unit addition, named for Indiana Senator Homer Capehart.<sup>xvii</sup>

Beginning in 1949, the Air Force also attempted to address the issue of integration. Official SAC policy enforced integration only on the air bases. What happened in the surrounding communities was not the Air Force's purview.<sup>xviii</sup> Air Force officials were blunt about this issue, while the LAFB was being built. In one meeting with the Lincoln League of Women Voters, the air

base commander Colonel Ervin Wursten said, “There’s no segregation in military life and these people will expect to find it the same here. Reception of Negro airmen and families into the community is largely your problem. But it’s something you must face up to sooner or later.” It is difficult to tell how much conflict occurred over race and housing in Lincoln. Newspaper articles suggest that substandard housing was being offered to minority airmen and their families. In one case the Mayor of Lincoln, Pat Boyles, successfully mobilized civic groups to help three black officers who had had a difficult time finding quality housing, but it is difficult to quantify the scope of the problem in Lincoln for a variety of reasons. SAC was slower than the rest of the Air Force at integrating its traditionally all white bomber unit and the early availability of on-base housing at LAFB may have minimized the issue of segregated housing in Lincoln.<sup>xix</sup>

### **Building the Lincoln Air Force Base**

Once the base was activated and money appropriated by Congress, the task of turning the old Second World War Army Airfield into a home for a modern jet powered strategic air force began. The original Army Air Field had been a large facility, but was designed for a five-year life span, a fact reflected in both the quality of construction and the spartan nature of the buildings that had been left behind.<sup>xx</sup> Some buildings from the old airfield that could be used had to be renovated and updated and hangars for larger postwar aircraft had to be built. Base infrastructure had to be put in place to make the base functional including transportation, phone systems, natural gas and electricity, water and sewer lines. The base needed housing, headquarters buildings, repair facilities, fuel and ammunition storage and fire fighting facilities. Finally it needed a huge amount of concrete poured for airplane parking aprons, taxiways and extended runways. In the end, the Air Base was completely transformed from its state as a temporary wartime training base and a postwar municipal airport to become an important link in the United States Cold War defense system.

Numbers reveal much of the building process. Five miles of railroad track were laid and 2,400 phones installed on base. Twenty-seven dormitory housing units were built and 11.5 miles of gas line was laid. Even something as apparently simple as a hangar can produce impressive numbers. One was built covering 2.25 acres with a roof of over 97,000 square feet. Its construction used 37,000 feet of copper tubing for a sprinkler system, 4,500 cubic yards of concrete for its footings and twenty inch thick floors, and 50,000 lineal feet of pipe for radiant heating.<sup>xxi</sup>

To build an airplane-parking apron, Dobson and Robinson Construction, Abel Construction and Dobson Brothers Construction, with a \$5,353,525 bid, jointly won the contract for what was then the largest paving project in Nebraska. The construction began with the building of a one-mile long railroad siding to bring in the 10,000 carloads of cement, rock, sand, gravel and other materials that would be needed during the construction. The actual project included removing or resurfacing existing apron, installing 23,000 feet of storm drain, and pouring the twenty-inch thick concrete parking apron, all done by a workforce of about 500 men with a \$60,000 a week payroll.<sup>xxii</sup>

### **Military Operations at the Lincoln Air Force Base**

Even as construction was being finished, the air base became home to its new tenants. The 98<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing officially took up residence at the LAFB in July 1954, while the 307<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing arrived in November. The two wings made up the 818<sup>th</sup> Air Division, which was activated on October 1954 and served as the administrative headquarters for the air base and its resident bomb wings. Both wings were newly returned to the United States from bases in Okinawa and Japan after participating in the Korean War. On the way to Nebraska, each wing stopped at Davis–Monathan AFB in Arizona to give up its Boeing B-29 Superfortresses for the new B-47 Stratojets that would become so familiar in the skies of Lincoln for the next 12 years.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Once each bomb wing became fully operational at LAFB, its main mission was to prepare to carry out a strategic nuclear strike against the Soviet Union. This meant long hours of flying while practicing bomb aiming and participating in SAC competitions in which bomb wings competed against each other for top scores in various categories. SAC used these competitions and the bragging rights that went along with winning them to boost morale and increase motivation.

More than training and competition, operations helped aircrews and their supporting personnel focused. To assure a counter-strike launch a counter strike if the Soviet Union struck first, SAC kept a small number of bomber crews on twenty-four hour alert, with planes loaded and ready to take off on short notice. Beyond this, during periods of high international tension when the Air Force went on alert, designated aircraft from SAC's bomb wings would be dispersed to smaller airfields near the parent air base. Another tactic temporarily sifted bombers from air bases in the interior of the United States to bases in the northeast during an emergency, so that aircraft traveling to and from the Soviet Union would fly by the shortest route, over the North Pole.

SAC also kept its aircraft dispersed and ready to strike back at the Soviet Union by rotating individual bomb wings to overseas SAC bases, typically in Europe or North Africa. There, bomb wings received training in regions of the world where they might be expected to fight and SAC made its bomber force a more difficult target as it rotated bomb wings back and forth across the Atlantic.

The presence of LAFB put Lincoln on the front lines during the Cold War. Local newspapers reported on LAFB personnel during the Cuban Missile Crisis. While the Air Force revealed as little as possible about the status of the air base and its bombers, the papers indicated that 8 B-47's from the 98<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing had deployed to Bradley Field in Connecticut during the crisis. SAC also indicated that it had raised the percentage of aircraft, including B-47's at LAFB, that were being kept on a fifteen minute alert status.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Another reflection of Lincoln's place on the front lines of the Cold War was the knowledge that LAFB's mission as part of the nuclear deterrent force aimed at the Soviet Union. Officially, the

Air Force never admitted that nuclear weapons were present on base. Spokesmen acknowledged that occasions existed when such weapons were stored on base only temporarily. In the early days of the Cold War this would have been true. Control over the early atomic weapons was centralized in the hands of the Atomic Energy Commission, and were to be assembled and released to the Air Force by order of the President. Later, as weapons became more standardized and the Air Force developed its strategic bombardment doctrine around them, it increasingly secured more direct control over bomb storage and assembly. By the time bombers were being kept on a 24-hour a day 15-minute alert status, it is hard to imagine that they didn't have nuclear weapons aboard. References to nuclear weapons in the official semi-annual wing histories at the Air Force Historical Research Agency, however, remain classified.<sup>xxv</sup>

The presence of the LAFB reinforced belief in the need for active civil defense measures. Before the air base returned, the city of Lincoln had done very little in the way of civil defense planning. City officials admitted that the only thing people could do to protect themselves in the case of an attack was to duck and cover using whatever informal shelter was handy. The air base held its first evacuation exercise in June of 1955. As part of a national civil defense test, it involved evacuating twenty-five hundred air base personnel and their families to Seward, Nebraska. By the late 1960's, Lincoln would develop an extensive network of public fallout shelters and an evacuation plan of its own.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The LAFB presence in Lincoln was also a constant reminder of the human cost of the Cold War. SAC bomber crews trained constantly and trained hard to carry out their missions. Fatal accidents involved LAFB bombers, during both local training exercises and overseas deployments. Local papers carried extensive coverage of these accidents, following the accident investigations in great detail. The largest single tragedy took place when, in October 1956, when a C-118 Liftmaster transport plane carrying fifty men from the 307<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing and nine navy crewmen disappeared over the Atlantic Ocean while returning the men from a deployment to Lakenheath, England. All men

on board were killed and only parts of the plane were found. Bennett Martin, mayor of Lincoln, set aside October 29, 1956 as a day of memorial for the men. Flags across the city flew at half-mast.<sup>xxvii</sup>

### **The City and the Air Force Base**

Lincoln related to the LAFB in other ways as well. As promised, Lincolnites and the many civic groups they belonged to joined in welcoming the men and their families. Likewise, the Air Base maintained a strong public relations campaign that made the base a prominent part of city life. A USO club, opened and staffed by local residents provided an entertainment venue for base personnel. In another program that was unique to the city, a business or civic group adopted a squadron stationed at the air base, awarding the airmen with honorary membership in the group.\* The honorary members would then be invited to social occasions sponsored by the adopting organization. The groups also raised money to equip the squadron day rooms in the base dormitories with furniture and recreational equipment.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The people of Lincoln supported the air base personnel in still other ways. Lincoln families took up the adoption idea by inviting individual airmen to dinner or attend church services with them. Fifteen hundred families participated, each family responsible for several airmen.<sup>xxix</sup>

An element of patriotism explains part of what motivated the citizens of Lincoln to participate in the off duty lives of the LAFB personnel. There was also an element of local pride in the eagerness to show the Air Force that Lincoln was doing its part to make the men welcome in the city. There was, however, a practical reason for finding ways to provide wholesome entertainment for the young

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\* One can speculate that the 307<sup>th</sup> Unit Command Section was the envy of the air base when it was adopted by the Lincoln Beer Dealers



airmen. Byron Dunn, president of the National Bank of Commerce and organizer of the adoption campaign said aptly, “When there is nothing to do in the dormitories, the airmen pile into cars and go carousing around the countryside.”<sup>xxx</sup>

Local educators did their part to help airmen get high school diplomas while they lived in Lincoln. The Lincoln Air Base Coordinating Council’s Education Committee helped to provide information on adult education classes that were available to the airmen. The committee included representatives of the University of Nebraska, Nebraska Wesleyan University, Cotner College, Union College, the Lincoln Public Schools, the Nebraska State Department of Education and the LAFB. Efforts were made to schedule classes at times that were convenient for the airmen. Data remains incomplete, but one source suggests that by 1956, after only two years of base operations, 163 airmen had received their high school diplomas while in Lincoln.<sup>xxxii</sup>

The LAFB also worked to become an important part of the city’s daily life. The base raised money for local charities like the United Fund, brought students of the Lincoln Public Schools on to the base for education programs, and invited the public to participate in Air Force social activities like Armed Forces Day. The celebration of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of SAC included a military parade and the christening of the B-47 “City of Lincoln” by Mrs. Carl Deitmeyer, Mrs. America of 1955.<sup>xxxiii</sup> In 1959, LAFB joined in celebrating the city of Lincoln’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday with an open house displaying a variety of the latest aircraft and missiles and staging a flyover by KC-97 tankers, B-47 bombers and F-86 and F-102 fighters.<sup>xxxiiii</sup>

One of the largest events held at the base was a four-day long “Aqua-Air Show” jointly held by the air base and the city in 1958. It showed off the skills of the Air National Guard Minutemen and the Air Force Thunderbird acrobatic teams. Along with Master of Ceremonies movie and TV star Andy Devine, the event also featured a water show staged on Bowling Lake, a man made lake that was built as part of an outdoor recreation facility on air base land for the use of the airmen and their

families.\* Some 166,000 people attended the event over the four days and it was considered a huge public relations success.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

### **The End of an Era**

The LAFB began entering the missile age in 1959 when plans were announced to deploy an Atlas missile squadron at the base. The 551<sup>st</sup> Strategic Missile Squadron(SMS) would be assigned to Lincoln and its missile silos would be scattered in rural areas throughout Southeastern Nebraska. Defense of the air base and its new missiles would be increased by the deployment of two Nike-Hercules air defense missile batteries one near Crete and one near Raymond, Nebraska.

The Atlas missile was one of a pair of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) that the United States had recently developed. Its solid fueled partner, the Titan missile, would also be deployed in various locations around the United States. The twelve-missile squadron assigned to Lincoln was equipped with the Atlas-F version, the last and most advanced model to be put into operation. The missiles were deployed at twelve separate sites, a change from the previous practice of positioning them in groups of three. The Lincoln squadron was also one of the first to be deployed upright in an underground silo hardened to one hundred pounds per square inch. Earlier Atlas D missiles had been deployed above ground in unhardened shelters called “coffins” and had to be lifted upright to be fueled and launched. Atlas E missiles had been deployed underground but hardened only to twenty-five pounds per square inch. Either way, given the slow and laborious process of preparing an Atlas missile for launch, the method of deployment used at LAFB made them less vulnerable to a surprise attack.<sup>xxxv</sup>

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\* The lake was named for an LAFB pilot who was killed in an accident while on temporary deployment in England in 1956.

The Nike-Hercules missile, a second-generation strategic air defense weapon, had been developed to defend against the increasing ability of the Soviet Union to launch a nuclear attack against the United States using both aircraft and missiles. An earlier version, the Nike-Ajax, carried conventional fragmentation warhead. The Nike system's inability to distinguish between individual bombers in a mass formation, and the high speeds of missiles made pinpoint interception highly difficult. As a result the Nike-Hercules was designed to incorporate a nuclear warhead, reducing the need for accuracy when intercepting an attack.

The new missile deployments portended another round of construction that would pump millions of dollars into the local economy. The Army Corps of Engineers would issue contracts to build twelve individual missile silos scattered across Lancaster and neighboring counties, and two air defense batteries. The move also meant more men coming to Lincoln as the missileers of the 551<sup>st</sup> SMS arrived to take up their duties. At the same time, the arrival of the missiles also served notice that the usefulness of the LAFB and the bombers that called it home might be coming to an end.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

The demise of the air base had been foreseen as early as 1960. Newspaper editorials recognized the increasing obsolescence of the B-47. Combined with the arrival of missiles it was acknowledged that the future of the LAFB was shaky at best. The Air Force agreement to allow the city to build a second civil use runway on the base raised the level of concern even higher. With an additional runway and potentially thousands of more flights a year in and out of the already crowded air base facilities, it was difficult to imagine that the safety conscious Air Force was planning to stay in Lincoln for very long.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Recognizing the uncertainty of the base's continued existence, the city made an effort to get the Air Force to declare the base permanent, a designation given to bases it intended to maintain for at least twenty-five years. The effort broke down as the city refused to deed the land without the Air Force's promise to return the land should the base ever be closed and the Air Force refused to make such a promise.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Though the LAFB did not get the desired designation, Cold War events intervened to extend the life of the LAFB just as the city was contemplating the base's closure. The series of crises that led to construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 also led to a defense build up by the Kennedy Administration that delayed the retirement of B-47's from active service.

By 1964 changes in the strategic environment led to the announcement of plans to close the base. The Air Force was phasing out its B-47 wing and the LAFB would officially close in June of 1966. The Air Force considered other possible uses for the facilities but determined that no substitute mission could be found for the base. Like the B-47, the Atlas ICBM had outlived its usefulness. Newer generations of ICBMs were being deployed, and the Atlas F missile silos deployed around Lincoln would also be closed down.<sup>xxxix</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Closure of LAFB ended Lincoln's time on the Cold War's front line, but Lincoln's experience reveals the complexity and pervasiveness of the Cold War on America. The political and business leaders of the city had to lobby for the reactivation of the air base in the face of many obstacles, not the least of which was maneuvering through a complex Federal bureaucracy in order to get the Defense Department to approve reactivation and the United States Congress to pay for it. Problems arose that could have prevented reactivation from taking place, but city leaders did what was necessary to overcome them. When money was needed to move the airport terminal, businesses

stepped up and contributed. When local conflicts developed over Lincoln's civil aviation needs, city leaders brought everyone together and forged a compromise that satisfied most everyone.

Economically the air base affected the city's economy in the short run, but the extent of the effect remains unclear. Some local businesses developed new skills in scaling up for Air Force projects, but the rapid recovery of the city's economy after the base closure suggests relatively shallow roots in Lincoln's economy.

It would be easy to explain the city's enthusiasm for LAFB as a consequence of economic expectations, but examination of the actual results points to other factors. Citizens of Lincoln gave reactivation of the air base their overwhelming approval when they voted in favor of awarding the Air Force a ninety-nine year lease on the land. When the air base was formally reactivated, the city opened its arms to the incoming airmen and welcomed them into their civic clubs, homes and churches. Lincolnites participated in the air base's celebrations and mourned its losses. Patriotism magnified by the constant tensions inherent in the cold war also played a role in promoting the overwhelmingly positive reaction to the air base. Nevertheless, we remain uncertain as to whether such feelings were deliberately manipulated by the government, or if they reflected a profound human response.

Like the World War II generation, the Cold War Generation and its memories are beginning to fade. What was once considered "ordinary" can now be seen as extraordinary. A city in what most considered peacetime mobilized as if it were at war. Memories of the Second World War when the city embraced the Lincoln Army Airfield conditioned Lincoln's response to Cold War events. Building on its experience the city sought to do its patriotic duty while remaining fully cognizant of the potential economic benefits of a large military presence.

*Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage—and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.*

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Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Fredrick J. Shaw, *Locating Air Force Base Sites: Histories Legacy* [Washington D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program, 204], p. 53-54.
- <sup>ii</sup> Shaw, p. 55-57.
- <sup>iii</sup> Air Force Decision On Reactivation Is Expected Soon, *Lincoln Star*, January 24, 1951.
- <sup>iv</sup> Chamber's Help Gets Naval Air Unit for Lincoln, *Lincoln in Action*, November 26, 1948.
- <sup>v</sup> Blackout Shrouds Air Force Plans, *Lincoln Star*, January 25, 1951; Air Base 'Clincher' In Offing, *Lincoln Star*, January 26, 1951.
- <sup>vi</sup> Reservists Are Asset To Lincoln, *Lincoln Star*, February 19, 1952.
- <sup>vii</sup> Committee Halts Added Reactivation Cash, Asks Information, *Lincoln Star*, June 25, 1952; Navy's Land Buy Granted Approval By House Group, *Lincoln Star*, September 3, 1953.
- <sup>viii</sup> Air Guard Moving Into New Facilities, *Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, January 26, 1958.
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