

Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg

April 30, 1948–June 29, 1953



Portrait by Francis Henry Beaugureau



HOYT S. VANDENBERG was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on January 24, 1899. His father, William Collins Vandenberg, was president of a bookbinding company. His uncle, Arthur H. Vandenberg, went from newspaper publishing in Grand Rapids to prominence as a Republican member of the U.S. Senate. His family moved to Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1910 and Hoyt participated in the gamut of high school sports—baseball, football, hockey, golf, and track. He had an avid interest in scouting, ultimately becoming an Eagle Scout. His experience at the Plattsburg Junior Camp at Plum Island, New York—a sort of military school for the wealthy—in the summer of 1916 instilled a desire for a military career. Political connections and a year of hard work at Columbian Preparatory School in Washington, D.C., earned him an appointment to West Point, where he graduated and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Air Service in 1923.

After completing the Primary Flying School at Brooks Field, Texas, in 1923 and Advanced Flying School at Kelly Field, Texas, the next year, he received his first assignment with the Third Attack Group at Kelly Field and assumed command of the 90th Attack Squadron. In Texas he married Gladys Rose, whom he had met as a cadet. They had two children. In 1927 he became an instructor at the Air Corps Primary Flying School at March Field, California. From 1929 to 1931 Vandenberg was with the 6th Pursuit Squadron at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, where he served as squadron commander for most of that period. After two years as an instructor at Randolph Field, Texas, he entered the Air Corps Tactical School at Maxwell Field, Alabama. He graduated in 1935, was promoted to captain, and the following year graduated from the Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He graduated from the Army War College in 1939 and served in the Plans Division of the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps. In March 1940 he was promoted to major and assigned to the staff of Maj. Gen. Henry H. Arnold, with whom he helped develop strategic plans for Army Air Corps deployment in war. He was promoted to temporary lieutenant colonel in November 1941 and to temporary colonel in January 1942. Two months later he was named operations and training officer of the Air Staff.

In June 1942 Vandenberg went to England, where he joined Lt. Col. Lauris Norstad to plan the invasion of North Africa and to organize the required air forces. While in England he

helped organize and was appointed chief of staff of the Twelfth Air Force under Maj. Gen. James H. Doolittle. On February 18, Vandenberg became chief of staff of the Northwest African Strategic Air Force, with which he flew on numerous missions over Tunisia, Italy, Sardinia, Sicily, and Pantelleria during the North African campaign. He was awarded both the Silver Star and the Distinguished Flying Cross for his services during this time.

In August 1943 he returned to Washington, D.C., and to Air Corps headquarters as deputy chief of the Air Staff. The following month he became head of the Air Mission to Russia under Ambassador Averell Harriman and returned to the United States in January 1944. In March 1944 he was promoted to temporary major general and ordered back to England as deputy commander of the Allied Expeditionary Air Force under Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur W. Tedder and as commander of the U.S. air component. In August 1944, having already led in planning the tactical air support program for the European invasion, Vandenberg took from Lt. Gen. Lewis H. Brereton the command of the Ninth Air Force—a huge unit consisting of more than four thousand officers and men. The Ninth flew close tactical support missions in conjunction with ground forces, particularly those of Lt. Gen. George S. Patton's Third Army, and flew escort missions with the strategic bombers of the Eighth Air Force. In March 1945 Vandenberg was promoted to the temporary rank of lieutenant general. In May he returned to Washington, D.C., and in July was named assistant chief of staff of operations of the Army Air Forces. The following January he was appointed chief of the Intelligence Division of the General Staff and in June became director of the Central Intelligence Group, a predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency, which was formed in 1947. In September 1947 he became deputy commander and chief of the air staff of the Army Air Forces.

When the Air Force attained its independence in September 1947, General Vandenberg became vice chief of staff, and in April 1948 he succeeded Gen. Carl Spaatz as Chief of Staff of the Air Force. He held that post through critical periods of the Berlin Airlift, 1948–1949, and the Korean War, 1951–1953. He was a leading figure in the Air Force–Navy fight over carrier-based aviation, which was resolved in favor of the Air Force. The controversy over the Armed Services Unification Bill found him in a leading role as a champion of unification. “Air power can never win a war by itself,” he said. “The Air Force is one part of an air–land–sea team, on which no one unit is more important than the other two.” Vandenberg got along very well with the first secretary of the Air Force, W. Stuart Symington. The pair worked closely together and their professional relationship continued after Symington left office in 1950.

At the outbreak of the Korean War, the Air Force barely was able to perform its atomic mission. Its funding had been cut by the bare-bones policies of President Harry S Truman and Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, which prompted Vandenberg to consider his charge a “shoestring air force.” During his tenure as chief, Vandenberg pursued technological modernization for the Air Force—rocket development, computer proliferation, thermonuclear experimentation, and the transition to an all-jet inventory. He also picked competent individuals for crucial positions—

Gen. Curtis E. LeMay for the Strategic Air Command, Gen. Lauris Norstad in Europe, Lt. Gen. Otto P. Weyland in Korea, and Maj. Gen. William H. Tunner for the Berlin Airlift.

On April 30, 1952, Vandenberg began serving an extended term of fourteen months as Air Force chief of staff. This term was granted by President Truman to enable him to round out thirty years of service in the highest rank he attained. During his last year in office, he fought hard for the 143-wing Air Force. Always conscious of the ever-growing Soviet threat, he argued that anything less than a force of that size would be a “calculated risk” to the security of the United States and the free world. Although he lost that immediate effort—the program would be stretched out—he could be proud that the Air Force had doubled in size since the beginning of his tenure.

At General Vandenberg’s retirement ceremony in June 1953, Secretary of the Air Force Harold E. Talbott, who presented the Distinguished Service Medal to Vandenberg, said he was “a prime architect of today’s powerful air arm” and a “brilliant air strategist.” Soon after his retirement, the cancer that had been diagnosed earlier began to take its toll, and he succumbed to his illness on April 2, 1954. His funeral was held at the Washington Cathedral, and the prominence of the man and the significance of his untimely loss could be seen in the list of pallbearers—George Marshall, Robert Lovett, Stuart Symington, Carl Spaatz, Omar Bradley, and Bernard Baruch. Gen. Nathan F. Twining, who served three years as Vandenberg’s vice chief and would succeed him, said at the time of the funeral service that “only those who worked closely with General Vandenberg were fully aware of the depth of his thinking, the careful balance of his judgment and the soundness of his decisions.”