

Gen. Lew Allen, Jr.

July 1, 1978–June 30, 1982



Portrait by John G. Bonner



LEW ALLEN, JR. was born on September 30, 1925, in Miami, Florida. He graduated from high school in Gainesville, Texas, in 1942 and entered the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, the following year. He graduated in 1946 with a bachelor of science degree and a commission as a second lieutenant. During his West Point summers, he took primary flying training at Chickasha, Oklahoma, where he flew the PT-17 and the Stearman, and completed advanced training at Stewart Field. He was awarded pilot's wings at graduation from West Point.

When he completed multiengine flight training in November 1946, Lieutenant Allen was assigned to Strategic Air Command's (SAC's) 7th Bombardment Group at Carswell Air Force Base, Texas, where he flew B-29s and B-36s and served in various positions related to nuclear weaponry. He was among the first class of qualified nuclear weaponeers in the Air Force. Allen attended the Air Tactical Course at Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida, and returned to Carswell as an instructor and assistant special weapons officer for the 7th Bombardment Wing. In his four years at SAC, he witnessed its astounding dramatic change from a very poor and unprofessional entity to a very disciplined and professional organization under the leadership of Gen. Curtis E. LeMay.

In September 1950 he entered the University of Illinois for graduate training in nuclear physics and received a master of science degree in 1952. He earned a doctorate degree in physics in 1954 after completing an experimental thesis on high-energy photonuclear reactions. Captain Allen was then assigned to the Atomic Energy Commission's Scientific Laboratory at Los Alamos, New Mexico, as a physicist in the test division. At this assignment he conducted experiments in several of the nuclear test series at Bikini and in Nevada. He was given an unusual degree of responsibility and independence and actually was one of the last military officers assigned to the laboratories strictly as a scientist. While at Los Alamos he gained a reputation for competence in a multidisciplinary field and was involved in testing the vulnerability of nuclear weapons to other nuclear weapons.

From June 1957 to December 1961 Major Allen was stationed at Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico, as a science adviser to the physics division of the Air Force Special Weapons Center. He focused his attention on the military effects of high-altitude nuclear explosions and

participated in several weapons test series. He was the scientific director of a major experiment that used high-altitude rockets to measure the characteristics of electrons trapped in the geomagnetic field after an exoatmospheric nuclear burst.

His tours at Los Alamos and Kirtland placed Allen in a working relationship with a number of prominent people in the nuclear weapons community. Among them was Harold Brown, the director of the Livermore Laboratory, the counterpart to Los Alamos. Under President John F. Kennedy, Brown became the director of defense research and engineering in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and subsequently asked Allen to join his office. As a result, in December 1961 Allen was assigned to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, space technology office, in Brown's directorate, where he remained until 1965.

From 1965 to 1973 Allen was assigned to the Office of the Secretary of the Air Force, initially in Los Angeles as deputy director for advanced plans in the directorate of special projects. He moved to the Pentagon in June 1968 as deputy director of space systems and became director twelve months later. Allen returned to Los Angeles in September 1970 as assistant to the director of special projects and in April 1971 became director of special projects, with additional duty as deputy commander for satellite programs, Space and Missile Systems Organization. He witnessed the demise of the Dyna-Soar program and became involved with the Manned Orbital Laboratory program. He also participated in the Blue Gemini program, devising experiments for a version of the space vehicle that lacked a laboratory.

Allen served a twenty-eight-day stint as General Brown's chief of staff for Air Force Systems Command at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland. Thereafter, James Schlesinger—whom Allen had known from the Office of Management and Budget, which often reviewed Allen's space programs—offered him an assignment as one of Schlesinger's deputies at the Central Intelligence Agency. General Brown agreed to let Allen go in March 1973, and Allen served with Schlesinger until August. When Schlesinger was appointed as secretary of defense, he named General Allen to be the director of the National Security Agency and chief of central security service at Fort George G. Meade, Maryland.

In August 1977 Allen was named commander of Air Force Systems Command. Given his background in research and development, that assignment was a very comfortable fit. At Systems Command he worked on acquisitions that stemmed from the upgrade of the tactical forces following the conflict in Vietnam. Indeed, Allen oversaw the later stages of an intensive effort to upgrade the USAF's tactical forces through acquisition of the C-5, A-10, and F-16. Allen left Systems Command in April 1978 to take over as vice chief of staff of the Air Force and became chief of staff three months later. His appointment as chief was entirely unexpected because he had followed an unusual career path: he never had an overseas or a combat assignment, and most of his jobs were in highly specialized activities rather than in the basic line of the Air Force. Characteristically, Allen looked forward to the challenge.

Among the dominant issues Allen dealt with during his first two years as chief were the attitude, morale, and discipline of Air Force personnel. It was the era of the “Hollow Force” Air Force, when gross underfunding across the range of USAF activities—from operations and maintenance to morale, welfare, and recreation—caused adversities that reduced morale of the entire Air Force. Indeed, budgetary retrenchment, which limited flying hours, caused disgruntlement among pilots. Pilots claimed they were not receiving the training and experience to warrant the Air Force’s definition of them as fully proficient defenders. Working with his commanders, Allen was able to secure additional funding to increase flying hours, especially for the Tactical Air Command, and to turn around the pilot retention issue that resulted from the poor morale climate.

General Allen got along well with all three of the Air Force secretaries with whom he worked—John C. Stetson, Hans M. Mark, and Verne Orr. To General Allen, Secretary Orr was a “charming and vigorous gentleman who was characterized as much as anything else by an immediate and total dedication to the Air Force.” As chief, Allen worked closely with the Army on doctrinal issues, “attempting to improve the rationalization of the approaches of the two services into a common doctrine.”

Throughout his tenure Allen supported improvements that would increase the national combat capability, including survivability of strategic forces, enhanced combat readiness and sustainability of general-purpose forces, and expanded airlift capacity. Essential to these goals was having adequate numbers of experienced, motivated people to staff and maintain those weapon systems. While stressing the rebuilding of the nuclear deterrent forces, he pursued the improvement of general-purpose forces to counter the steadily expanding Soviet conventional capabilities.

Like the other services in the early 1980s, the Air Force “rode the crest of President Ronald Reagan’s wave” of support for defense spending. By the end of his tour as chief, General Allen could point to some significant progress in correcting long-standing deficiencies in the forces and in improving defense capabilities. Speaking in support of continued attention to national goals, Allen maintained that “we must stay the course” even though it would not be easy. “We can and must afford the cost. We cannot afford the weakness and loss of credibility that a failure to stand up to the Soviet challenge in this dangerous decade” would entail.

After retiring from the Air Force in June 1982, Allen became director of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, California, and remained there until 1990. The next year he became chairman of the board of Draper Laboratory in Boston, Massachusetts.