

Gen. Larry D. Welch

July 1, 1986–June 30, 1990



Portrait by Peter Egeli



LARRY D. WELCH was born on June 9, 1934, in Guymon, Oklahoma, and graduated from Liberal High School in Kansas in 1952. He enlisted in the Kansas National Guard in October 1951 and served with the 161st Armored Field Artillery until he enlisted in the U.S. Air Force. In November 1953 he entered the aviation cadet program and received his pilot's wings and a commission as a second lieutenant. He served initially as a flight instructor until his assignment in July 1958 to Headquarters Air Training Command, Randolph Air Force Base, Texas.

In 1962 Captain Welch went to Europe to serve as chief of the combat operations center for the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing and later as a pilot in the 389th Tactical Fighter Squadron. He returned to the United States to work as pilot, flight commander, and operations officer for the 389th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico. As a major, Welch went in March 1966 to the Republic of Vietnam, where he was operations officer for the 389th Tactical Fighter Squadron stationed at Phan Rang Air Base and then chief of the operations and training division for the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing at Da Nang Air Base. While stationed in Vietnam he flew combat missions in F-4Cs over North and South Vietnam and Laos.

Returning stateside in February 1967, Welch attended the Armed Forces Staff College at Norfolk, Virginia, and then was assigned to Headquarters U.S. Air Force, Washington, D.C., as director of air superiority studies, fighter division, under the assistant chief of staff for studies and analysis. During this period, several of his academic pursuits came to fruition: he received a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Maryland in 1971 and a master of science degree from George Washington University, in Washington D.C., the following year, and he studied at the National War College in Washington, D.C., from August 1971 to July 1972.

In July 1972 he was assigned to Tactical Air Command. He served the command for two years, first as deputy commander for operations and then as vice commander, 35th Tactical Fighter Wing, at George Air Force Base, California. In September 1974 he became special assistant to the commander, Tactical Air Command, Langley Air Force Base, Virginia. The following August he took command of the First Tactical Fighter Wing at Langley.

In August 1977, one month after receiving his first star, General Welch became inspector general, Tactical Air Command, and in October of that year he became deputy chief of staff of

plans. Remaining at Langley, Welch assumed the duties of deputy chief of staff of operations at Tactical Air Command in March 1979. In June 1981, after nearly seven years at Langley, he transferred to Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina, as commander of the Ninth Air Force and component commander for the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force.

In November 1982 Welch went to Headquarters U.S. Air Force in Washington, D.C., as deputy chief of staff for programs and resources, and in August 1984 he became vice chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force. From August 1985 to June 1986 he served as commander in chief, Strategic Air Command, and director of Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff at Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska. He became the Air Force chief of staff on July 1, 1986.

At the beginning of his tenure as chief, General Welch was concerned about the inability of the U.S. strategic deterrent force to retaliate promptly against “hardened Soviet nuclear forces” and command and control assets. He made the strategic force issues one of his top priorities. He saw the Peacekeeper ICBM as the only solution, with the deployment of one hundred of these missiles representing to him “the essential, rational foundation for an affordable force to deal with Soviet offensive forces.” He saw the B-1B as a superb bomber that would serve for future years, first as a penetrating bomber and later as a cruise missile carrier. Welch believed the advanced technology bomber (ATB), or Stealth, would continue the bomber penetration role well into the next century. He supported a management philosophy that featured decentralized authority and responsibility accomplished by placing one supervisor in full control of “one piece” of the Air Force mission. “Full control,” he maintained, extended “from authority and resources to accountability.”

Like some of his predecessors, he considered motivating people to be another of his top priorities. He noted that “whatever progress the Air Force [made] in combat readiness and combat capability [was] derived from the fact that [the Air Force] has high-quality people.”

Recalling his experience with “joint initiatives” when he served as Gen. Charles A. Gabriel’s vice chief of staff and deputy chief of staff for programs and resources, Welch held that “there is absolutely no question that we will continue the ‘joint initiatives’ with the other services.” He believed that it was natural to pursue joint initiatives, especially because they had been very successful, “having saved both the Air Force and the Army a lot of money.”

Two years later, when the USSR professed a more open attitude toward the West, as expressed by Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*—or openness and restructuring—Welch urged that the United States remain strong in order to keep pressure for such change on the Kremlin. He added that it was the strength of the free world that brought the Soviets to the arms negotiation table: “It is the success of our system of alliances and the strategy of deterrence that leads the Soviets to conclude they cannot afford to build the military forces needed to impose their will on the free world.” Welch saw that the federal deficit was becoming a major national concern and that “a smaller defense budget is seen by some as a major means of reducing that deficit.” In response to that theory, Welch declared that “neither

facts nor logic lead to a conclusion that the deficit is caused by increases in defense spending or is likely to be cured by the decreases in defense spending.” Near the end of this tenure he saw little relief for his successor, maintaining that the Soviet phasedown brought to a head all the clichés about air power and the need to reexamine budgets accompanied by congressional pressure to spend the so-called “peace dividend.” On June 30, 1990, General Welch—longtime fighter pilot, Vietnam combat veteran, former commander in chief of SAC, and defender of Air Force roles and missions in the face of severe fiscal restraints—retired.

After leaving the Air Force, Welch became president and chief executive officer of the Institute for Defense Analysis in Washington, D.C., a federally chartered research center providing both operations and technical analysis and management and information systems design and development to the Department of Defense and other U.S. government agencies. He also served as director of the Aerospace Education Foundation and of the Air Force Academy Foundation. In addition, he chaired the Joint Committee on Nuclear Weapons Surety and the President’s Security Policy Advisory Board, and he was a member of the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States and of the Defense Intelligence Agency Science and Technology Advisory Board.