

Creating the Air Force, 1924

Introduction

In this July 1924 letter to aviation pioneer and publisher Lester D. Gardner, Brigadier General William “Billy” Mitchell prophesied the coming tide of Japanese militarism. Concerned about Japan’s growing military power in the skies, Mitchell argued exhaustively for the creation a branch of the US military separate from the Army and Navy and dedicated to the air. “With the development of our methods,” he wrote, “we can absolutely dominate sea areas practically anywhere. It is the only sure method of national defense that we have at the present time where we could dominate.”

Following World War I, the US military scaled back its focus on the development of a formidable air force. Without a dedicated US air force, and facing the prowess and strength of Japanese aviation, Mitchell foresaw destruction as the outcome of any future American military intervention in Japan. Of the US Navy, Mitchell wrote: “if they went anywhere near Japan they never would come back: the Japanese air force would destroy them at once.” Mitchell’s outspoken criticism of his superiors earned him a demotion to colonel the year after this letter was written, and he was forced into an early retirement following a court martial conviction stemming from his accusations against military leadership.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, brought to life the threat Mitchell had warned of two decades earlier. Mitchell, however, did not live to see his predictions come true. He died on February 19, 1936. Following the Pearl Harbor attack, however, Mitchell was posthumously promoted to major general, and in 1946 he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in recognition of his tremendous foresight concerning the development of America’s aviation forces.

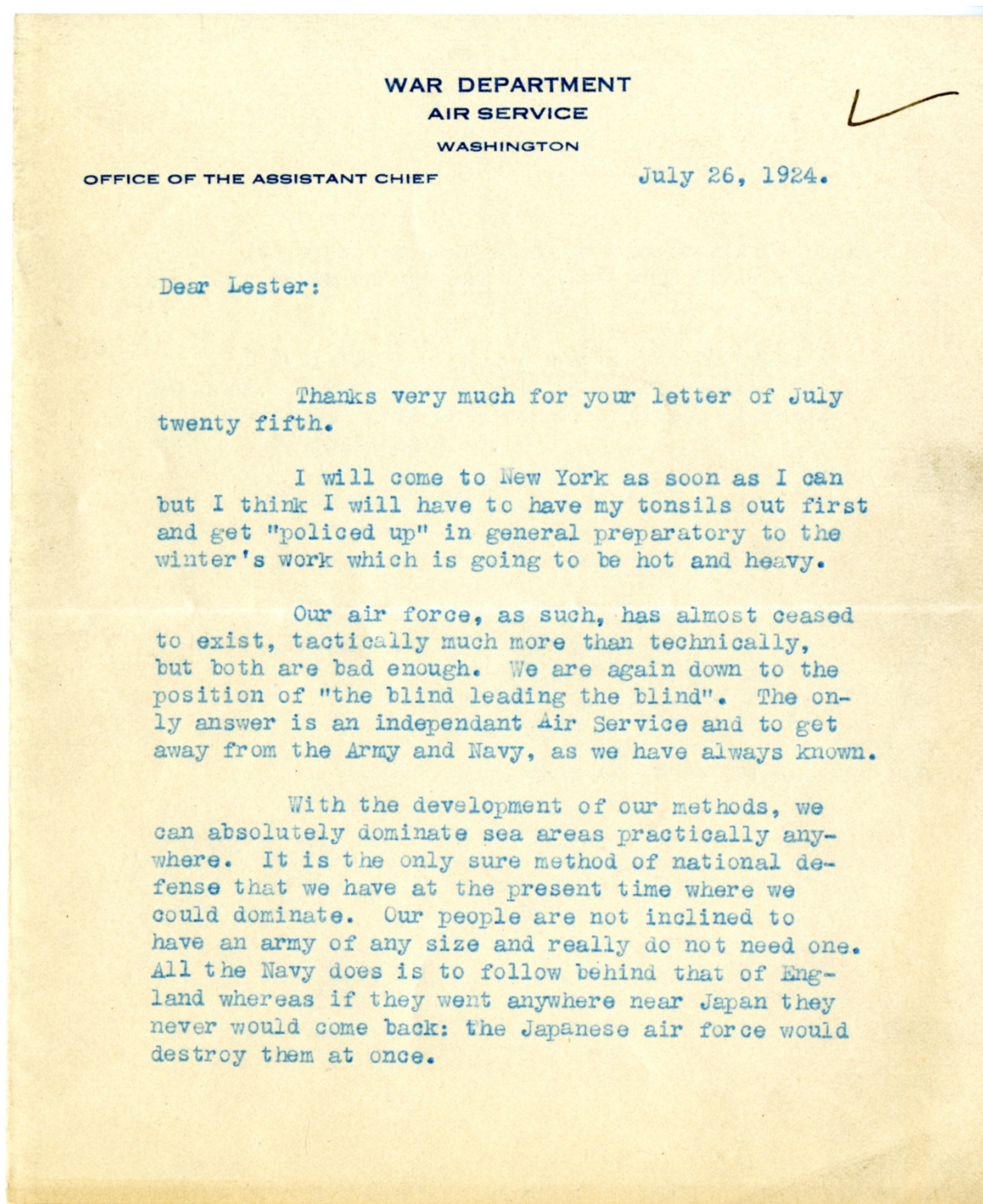
Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction, the excerpt, and the letter. Then apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. How did Billy Mitchell assess the strength of America’s military in 1924?
2. What specific recommendations did Mitchell make in his letter to Lester Gardner?
3. Why was Mitchell demoted and then posthumously promoted?
4. How does the American military today reflect the concerns and advice of Billy Mitchell?

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Image



William E. Mitchell to Lester D. Gardner, July 26, 1924 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00950)

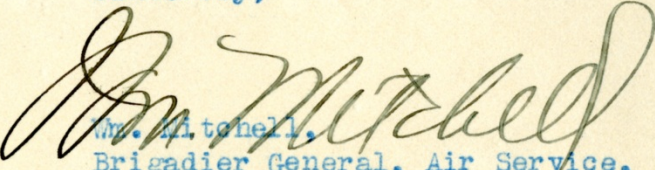
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It is pretty near time for the American people to dig into these things and find out what it is all about.

I will let you know a day or two before I go to New York. I have never felt better in my life but I think I had better have this tonsil business attended to before I do anything else.

With best regards

Sincerely,


Mr. Mitchell,
Brigadier General, Air Service,
Assistant Chief of Air Service.

Mr. Lester Gardner,
225 Fourth Avenue,
New York, N. Y.