

What You Can Do

By John O. Gray, AFA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

FOR THE past seven months, I have served as AFA's Executive Director on an interim basis while the Association searched for a highly qualified individual to be its top staff executive. It has now found that person in Charles L. Donnelly, Jr., who assumes the Executive Directorship on May 1. We are fortunate to have a man of his caliber because he—and we—have a big job ahead of us.

The relatively brief period since October 1 has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my seventy-one-plus years. It has also been one of the most frustrating. This is a function in the first instance of my pride in the impressive accomplishments of our Association and in the second of the realization that there is so much more that we could and should be doing.

I had not had time lately to think much about AFA history. Then a special reminder suddenly brought the memories flooding back. The trigger was an expression of enthusiasm from the city of Las Vegas, urging our Board of Directors to hold its midwinter meeting there next year to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of AFA's World Congress of Flight in Las Vegas in 1959.

James H. Douglas, Jr., Secretary of the Air Force back in 1959, said the World Congress of Flight was "one of the most significant events in aviation history." Gen. Curtis LeMay called it "a formal announcement to the world of the arrival of the jet age." Fifty-one nations participated, and for a full week, AFA held center stage, informing the nation and the world about aerospace power. *Life* magazine gave it five pages of coverage, and NBC-TV broadcast an hour-long special to 40,000,000 viewers.

There have been other special moments. The April 1956 issue of *AIR FORCE Magazine*, carrying fifteen articles on Strategic Air Command, burst to national attention when Arthur Godfrey held up a copy on his CBS-TV "Talent Scouts" show. "Steal one, borrow one, buy one if you have to, but get a copy and read it from cover to cover!" he told his audience. The response was overwhelming. AFA hurriedly condensed the material into a twenty-four-page booklet and mailed copies free to those who wrote and called for it—all 160,000 of them.

In October 1969, another *AIR FORCE Magazine* article, "The Forgotten Americans of the Vietnam War," was the catalyst that brought the plight of our prisoners of war and missing in action to the nation's attention. *Reader's Digest*, with its circulation of 18,000,000, condensed our article, and between AFA and the *Digest*, some 700,000 additional copies were published in reprints. After that, the POWs and MIAs were forgotten no longer.

Spectacular achievements—such as those mentioned above and AFA's Gathering of Eagles two years ago—are highlights in our heritage, but they are by no means all of them. Since AFA was established in 1946, it has worked steadily to promote understanding of aerospace power and national defense. Some of our most effective actions have been the quieter ones, routine and regular efforts that do not command the kind of public attention attracted by the big events.

There are now nearly a quarter million of us, and our Constitution makes our objectives clear: "The Association provides an organization through which we as free people may unite to address the defense responsibilities of our nation

imposed by the dramatic advance of aerospace technology; to educate the members and the public at large in what that technology can contribute to the security of free people and the betterment of mankind; and to advocate military preparedness of the United States and its allies adequate to maintain the security of the United States and the free world."

All of us would profit by rereading these lines periodically. I cannot count the times I have heard AFA members ask, "What can I do?" The Constitution tells us what we are—or should be—trying to achieve. First, each of us should ensure that our efforts, organizational and individual, are concentrated on addressing those objectives. Given that, the question then remaining is how best to go about the job.

AFA is chartered as a veterans organization, not a lobby. There are constraints on what we can do as an organization in our relations with Congress and legislators at other levels of government. There are no such restrictions on you as an individual AFA member. You are free to take on Congress as you wish—and I urge you to do so aggressively. I have lived in Washington for some thirty-seven years and can assure you that personal contacts from constituents often have far greater impact on Congress than do the daily efforts of the best and most expensive lobbyists in the city.

Have you written to your congressman lately, expressing your views on aerospace issues and national security? If not, why not? For that matter, have you been active in discussing these issues in your community? If not, don't you think that you should be?

Our monthly magazine, regular legislative reports prepared by the AFA staff, and such special products as the new series of white papers put accurate, up-to-date information on critical issues in your hands. Could you and your chapter be doing more to bring such information to the attention of your elected leaders, the news media, and your friends and neighbors?

AFA National President Sam Keith recently wrote to state and chapter presidents, asking them to find additional platforms in their localities for Air Force speakers who come to speak at Association meetings. This is a splendid idea, and in between times, we as AFA members ought to be looking for opportunities to speak out ourselves.

As I make these suggestions in response to the question "What can I do?", I know that many of you are already doing these things, and more. The fact that you are active in these ways is the greatest strength of our Association. AFA has shown itself capable of major achievements in the past. It is an effective champion of aerospace power and national defense today. I do not believe, though, that we have yet realized the full potential of our capability.

I leave the post of AFA Executive Director believing more firmly than ever that our achievements of the past can best serve us as an inspiration for what we do next. These are critical times for national security. There is more, much more, that we can do to promote public understanding and support for a strong defense.

This is the mission for which AFA was created, and the key to carrying it out is personal participation by you. Multiply that by a quarter million members, and there is no limit on what we are capable of achieving. ■