

# Hyman G. Rickover

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Admiral **Hyman G. Rickover**, U.S. Navy, (January 27, 1900 – July 8, 1986) was known as the "Father of the Nuclear Navy", which as of November 2005 had produced 199 nuclear-powered submarines, and 19 nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and cruisers, though many of these U.S. vessels are now decommissioned and others under construction. With his unique personality, political connections, responsibilities and depth of knowledge regarding naval nuclear propulsion, he became the longest-serving active duty military officer in U.S. history with 63 years of continuous service.

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Hyman G. Rickover (1955)

## Childhood

Hyman George Rickover was born to a Jewish family in Maków Mazowiecki (of Poland, but at that time and prior to WWI under Russian occupation) and immigrated to the United States with his parents as Russian emigrants in 1905. They resided in a poor, immigrant area of Chicago, Illinois. He later learned that all the Jewish residents of his Polish hometown -- men, women and children -- were killed in the *Shoa* (Hebrew: שואה, "calamity"), commonly referred to as The Holocaust, of WWII; a dramatic indicator of the historical fact that over 90% of the Jews in Poland were killed by Nazi Germany during that infamous era. The surname Rickover is derived from the village and the estate of Ryki, located within an hour of Warsaw as is Maków Mazowiecki. The entire Jewish community of Ryki, constituting about 70% of the town's population, also perished during the Nazi occupation.

## Early naval career through World War II

Rickover was commissioned as an ensign after graduation from the US Naval Academy in 1922, and served on the destroyer USS *La Vallette* (DD-315) and the battleship USS *Nevada* (BB-36) before attending Columbia University, where he earned the degree of Master of Science (M.Sc.) in Electrical Engineering. From 1929 to 1933 he qualified for submarine duty and command aboard the submarines S-9 and S-48.

During 1933, while at the Office of the Inspector of Naval Material in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Rickover translated the book *Das Unterseeboot (The Submarine)*, by World War I Admiral Hermann Bauer. Rickover's translation became a basic text for the US submarine service.

In June 1937, he assumed command of the minesweeper USS *Finch* (AM-9). Later that year, he was selected as

an Engineering Duty Officer and spent the remainder of his career serving in that specialty.

His service as head of the Electrical Section in the Bureau of Ships during World War II brought him a Legion of Merit and gave him experience in directing large development programs, choosing talented technical people, and working closely with private industry.

## Naval Reactors and the Atomic Energy Commission



Admiral Rickover looking over USS *Nautilus*, the world's first nuclear-powered vessel.

Soon after his U.S. Navy service during World War II, he became an early convert to the idea of nuclear marine propulsion and more specifically, Naval Nuclear Propulsion. Assigned to the Bureau of Ships in September 1947, Rickover received training in nuclear power at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and worked with the bureau to explore the possibility of nuclear ship propulsion. In February 1949 he received an assignment to the Division of Reactor Development, Atomic Energy Commission and then assumed control of the Navy's effort as Director of the Naval Reactors Branch in the Bureau of Ships. This twin role enabled him to lead the effort to develop the world's first nuclear-powered submarine, USS *Nautilus* (SSN-571), which was launched and commissioned in 1954, as well as oversee the development of the first U.S. commercial nuclear power plant in Shippingport, Pennsylvania.

Promoted to the rank of Vice Admiral in 1958, the same year he was awarded the first of two Congressional Gold Medals of Honor[1] (<http://www.congressionalgoldmedal.com/HymanGeorgeRickover.htm>), for nearly the next three decades Rickover exercised tight control over the ships, technology, and personnel of the nuclear Navy, interviewing and approving or denying *every* prospective officer being considered for

a nuclear ship. Over the course of Rickover's record-length career, these personal interviews amounted to tens of thousands of highly impressionable events <sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>. Varying from arcane to combative to humorous -- and ranging from midshipmen to very senior naval aviators who sought command of aircraft carriers (which sometimes lapsed into ego battles) -- the content of most of these interviews has been lost to history, though some were later chronicled in the several books on Rickover's career.

Rickover's stringent standards and powerful focus on personal integrity are largely credited with being responsible for the U.S. Navy's perfect record on reactor safety, perhaps being the only such organization involved in nuclear power.

He also made it a point to be aboard during the initial sea trial of every nuclear submarine completing its new-construction period, and by his presence both set his stamp of personal integrity that the ship was ready for the rigors of the open seas, and ensured adequate testing to either prove as much or to establish issues requiring resolution. That he was willing to put his own life on the line during such nascent operations spoke loud and clear that he understood the importance of related success, and expected as much dedication from his own staff as well as the submarine's construction yard.

As head of Naval Reactors, Rickover's focus and responsibilities were dedicated to reactor safety rather than tactical or strategic submarine warfare training. It could be argued that because of Rickover's singular focus on reactor operations, and direct line of communications with each nuclear submarine's captain, that this acted against the captains' warfighting abilities. However, this argument is hypothetical, not borne out by the highly classified results of U.S. submarine peacetime and wartime operations, and ignores the substantial resources,

focus and training that were otherwise poured into each of these other important areas as matters of highest national security.

Moreover, there's little argument that -- if only from the standpoints of availability of resources and combat readiness -- the accident-free record of U.S. Navy reactor operations stood in stark contrast to those of the America's primary competitor during the Cold War, the Soviet Union, which lost several submarines (<http://www.lostsubs.com/Soviet.htm>) to reactor accidents in both its haste and chosen priorities for competing with superior U.S. technology. That Rickover's domineering style and force of will had a substantial impact on the daily life of every captain of every U.S. nuclear-powered submarine and surface ship is otherwise undeniable.

Given Rickover's single-minded focus on naval nuclear propulsion, design and operations, it came as a surprise to many when near the end of his career he testified before the U.S. Congress that, were it up to him, he "would sink them all." A seemingly outrageous enigma of a statement -- and perhaps one attributable to an old man beyond his time -- in context, Rickover's personal integrity and honesty were such that he was lamenting the need for such war machines in the modern world, and specifically acknowledged as well that the employment of nuclear energy ran counter to the course of nature over time.

At a congressional hearing Rickover testified that:

"I do not believe that nuclear power is worth it if it creates radiation. Then you might ask me why do I have nuclear powered ships. That is a necessary evil. I would sink them all. I am not proud of the part I played in it. I did it because it was necessary for the safety of this country. That's why I am such a great exponent of stopping this whole nonsense of war. Unfortunately limits -- attempts to limit war have always failed. The lesson of history is when a war starts every nation will ultimately use whatever weapon it has available." *Further remarking:* "Every time you produce radiation, you produce something that has a certain half-life, in some cases for billions of years. I think the human race is going to wreck itself, and it is important that we get control of this horrible force and try to eliminate it." (Economics of Defense Policy: Hearing before the Joint Economic Committee, Congress of the United States, 97th Cong., 2nd sess., Pt. 1 (1982))

## Jimmy Carter and Three Mile Island

Following the Three Mile Island power plant partial meltdown on March 28, 1979, President Jimmy Carter commissioned a study, "Report of the President's Commission on the Accident at Three Mile Island (1979)," chaired by John G. Kemeny, then-president of Dartmouth College. It is claimed in an affidavit signed by Jane Rickover, the Admiral's daughter-in-law, that in her recollection of the Admiral's opinion "the report, if published in its entirety, would have destroyed the civilian nuclear power industry." According to her sworn statement, Rickover persuaded Carter to have the report diluted. She also reports that in November 1985, eight months before his death, "that he had come to deeply regret his action." [2] (<http://www.mindfully.org/Nucs/TMI-Censored-Rickover.htm>)

Carter was one of the officers that Rickover had interviewed. Carter named his first autobiography, "Why not the best?," from a rhetorical challenge from Rickover, who was disappointed in Carter's admission that his own efforts had not always been first-rate.

## Retirement and passage

On January 31, 1982, at age 82, after 63 years of service to his country under 13 presidents (Woodrow Wilson through Ronald Reagan), Rickover was forced to retire from the Navy as a full admiral by a former naval aviator, Secretary of the Navy John Lehman, with the knowledge and consent of President Reagan.

In the early 1980s, structural welding flaws -- whose nature and existence had been covered up by falsified inspection records -- led to the deconstruction and reconstruction of several submarines undergoing their initial build-out, all at vast expense. While the Navy had settled with General Dynamics in 1981, paying out \$634 million of \$843 million in related claims, Rickover was bitter over the yard's having effectively and successfully sued the Navy for its own incompetence and deceit (of no small irony, the U.S. Navy was also the yard's insurer; though incompetence and deceit were novel claims, the legal basis of the Navy payouts to General Dynamics was insurance compensation).

Furiously outraged, Rickover lambasted the settlement and its main advocate: Secretary Lehman. In fairness to Lehman, his main motivation in seeking a settlement was to put the entire submarine shipyard episode behind him in order to continue to focus on President Reagan's goal of financially challenging the Soviet Union by way of building toward a 600-ship Navy, which, while never actually numerically achieved, certainly contributed to the eventual economic collapse of the Soviet Union.

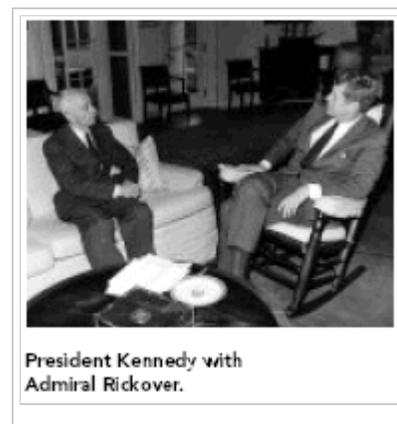
In this same time-frame, it came to public light that Rickover had accepted aesthetic gifts (which he typically gave away to Congressmen and others) from General Dynamics, though clearly without any bearing on his dealings with them. Regardless, Lehman used the opportunity to put Rickover in his place and formally admonished Rickover via a letter in his service record for having done so.

Beyond any personal enmity or power struggles between the two naval leaders, it was Rickover's advanced age (nearly 82 years-old), singular focus and political clout regarding nuclear power, and strong, near-insubordinate stance against paying the fraudulently inflated submarine construction claims that gave Secretary Lehman substantial political capital to have Rickover retired. A moderate loss of ship control and subsequent depth excursion during the sea trials of the newly constructed USS La Jolla (SSN-701) -- over which Rickover had direct supervisory control -- provided Lehman with all the final impetus he needed for ending Rickover's historical career.

Notably, the then-general manager of the prime contractor for U.S. submarines, P. Takis Veliotis of General Dynamics' Electric Boat division, was indicted by a federal grand jury in 1983 for taking kickbacks from a subcontractor. He escaped into exile in his native Greece where he remains a fugitive from U.S. justice. [3] ([http://www.nationarchive.com/Summaries/v239i0020\\_06.htm](http://www.nationarchive.com/Summaries/v239i0020_06.htm)) [4] ([http://www.nationarchive.com/Summaries/v238i0023\\_05.htm](http://www.nationarchive.com/Summaries/v238i0023_05.htm))

Admiral Rickover developed a decades-long and outspoken interest in the educational standards of the United States. This persistent interest led to some related discussions with President John F. Kennedy. [5] ([http://www.jfklibrary.org/pr\\_tapes\\_release\\_may2003.html](http://www.jfklibrary.org/pr_tapes_release_may2003.html)) [6] ([http://www.jfklibrary.org/newsletter\\_fall2003\\_05.html](http://www.jfklibrary.org/newsletter_fall2003_05.html)) While still on active duty, the Admiral had suggested that there are three things that a school must do: First, it must transmit to the pupil a substantial body of knowledge; second, it must develop in him the necessary intellectual skill to apply this knowledge to the problems he will encounter in adult life; and third, it must inculcate in him the habit of judging issues on the basis of verified fact and logical reasoning.

Rickover was particularly of the opinion that U.S. standards of education were unacceptably low. His first book centered on education and was a collection of essays calling for improved standards of education, particularly in math and science, entitled *Education and Freedom*. In this book the Admiral states that, "education is the most important problem facing the United States today" and "only the massive upgrading of the scholastic standards of our schools will guarantee the



future prosperity and freedom of the Republic.”



Admiral Rickover died at his home, located in Arlington, Virginia, on July 8, 1986 and was buried in Section 5 at Arlington National Cemetery. His first wife, Ruth Masters Rickover (1903-1972) is buried with him and the name of his second wife, Eleonore A. Bednowicz Rickover, whom he met and married while she was serving as a Commander in the Navy Nurse Corps, is also inscribed on his gravestone. He was survived by Robert Rickover, his sole son by his first wife, who is today a teacher of the Alexander technique.

At Arlington, Rickover's burial site overlooks the "eternal flame" at President John F Kennedy's grave site.

Of note, it was Rickover who gave

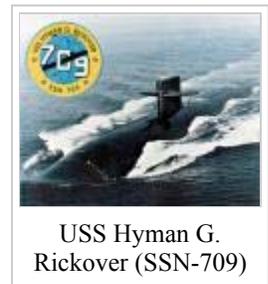
President Kennedy the Breton's prayer plaque, which states, "O God, the sea is so great and my boat is so small." The plaque is on display in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Museum (<http://www.jfklibrary.org/>), located in Boston, Massachusetts, as part of the Oval Office exhibit.

During the last century, only a few names naturally come to mind of those who have made a truly major impact on both their navies and nations: Mahan, Fisher and Gorshkov. Rickover joined them. Creating a detail-focused pursuit of excellence to a degree that was previously unknown, he redirected the U.S. Navy's ship propulsion, quality control, personnel selection, and training and education, and has had far-reaching effects on the defense establishment and the civilian nuclear energy field.

## Named in his honor

The *Los Angeles*-class submarine USS *Hyman G. Rickover* (SSN-709) was named for him. She was commissioned two years before the Admiral's death, making her one of the very few US Navy ships to be named for a living person.

USS Hyman G. Rickover was launched on August 27, 1983, sponsored by the Admiral's second wife, Mrs. Eleonore Ann Bednowicz Rickover, and commissioned on July 21, 1984. A plaque within the Rickover contains a poem called "Admiral Rickover," by writer Ronald W. Bell, that offers a summation of his contribution to American seapower.



USS Hyman G. Rickover (SSN-709)

*"Admiral Rickover"*  
*Possessed of a purpose*  
*He forged a path*  
*Across a frontier*  
*Untried and new*  
*Clinging to his course,*  
*He met the task*  
*Threescore and more*

*He served for you.*

(listed Jan. 27, 2006 by the Author with permission to Wikipedia for display)

*Rickover Hall* at the United States Naval Academy, housing the departments of Mechanical Engineering, Naval Ocean Engineering, Aeronautical and Aerospace Engineering, and *Rickover Center* at the Naval Nuclear Power Training Command (NNPTC), Charleston, South Carolina are also named in his honor.

Research Science Institute (formerly the Rickover Science Institute), founded by Admiral Rickover in 1984, is a highly respected summer science program hosted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for rising high school seniors from around the world.

## Awards

Admiral Rickover's numerous medals and decorations include:

- The Navy Distinguished Service Medal
- The Legion of Merit
- The Navy Commendation Medal
- The World War II Victory Medal

In recognition of his wartime service, he was made Honorary Commander of the Military Division of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire.

Admiral Rickover was twice awarded the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor for exceptional public service; the first in 1958, and the second 25 years later in 1983.

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter presented Admiral Rickover with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest non-military honor, for his contributions to world peace.

He also received 61 civilian awards (including the prestigious Enrico Fermi Award) and 15 honorary degrees.



The second of two Congressional Gold Medals awarded to Admiral Rickover.

## Additional reading and resources

- Rickover, Hyman G., *No Holds Barred: The Final Congressional Testimony of Admiral Hyman Rickover* (Center for Study of Responsive Law, 1982)
- Tyler, Patrick, *Running Critical: The Silent War, Rickover & General Dynamics* (Harper Trade, 1986)
- Duncan, Francis, *Rickover and the Nuclear Navy: The Discipline of Technology* (Naval Institute Press, 1990)
- Rockwell, Theodore, *The Rickover Effect: The Inside Story of How Adm. Hyman Rickover Built the Nuclear Navy* (John Wiley & Sons, 1995)
- Gordon, Robert B., *Working for Admiral Rickover: Memoir* (Naval Historical Foundation Memoir program, 2000)
- Duncan, Francis, *Rickover: The Struggle for Excellence* (Naval Institute Press, 2001)
- Rockwell, Theodore, *The Rickover Effect: How One Man Made a Difference* (Backinprint.com, 2002)
- Polmar, Norman; Allen, Thomas, *Rickover -- Admiral of the Fleet -- Controversy and Genius, A Biography* (Ross & Perry, 2003)
- David, Heather M., *Admiral Rickover and the Nuclear Navy* (Putnam Pub Group, 2004)
- PBS *Nova* on-line tours of USS Springfield and USS Nautilus

(<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/subsecrets/inside.html>)

- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (<http://www.ushmm.org/>)

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