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Admiral Rickover and the Cult of Personality

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When Admiral Hyman G. Rickover cleared his desk and took final departure from the U.S. Navy and the Naval Reactors Branch on the last day of January 1982, it marked the end of an era. None of us can quite share the feeling, for no one else ever completed 63 years of continuous active service before heading for pasture at age 82. The Norman Polmar and Thomas B. Allen biography of that career, written without Rickover's support and published despite the threat of a lawsuit, offers a fascinating view of the spawning, growth, and maturation of the Rickover empire.*

*Norman Polmar and Thomas B. Allen, *Rickover* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982, \$20.75), 744 pages.

During the last hundred years, only a few names come to mind of those who have made a major impact on their navies or nation: Mahan, Fisher, Gorshkov. Rickover can join them. He changed 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.

The book is tremendously important for the military professional in uniform or for the Washington bureaucrat. Whatever his branch of service, *Rickover* raises trenchant issues. Are we seeing the first of a new breed of technocratic flag and general officers or the last of the "characters" in uniform succumbing to the era of the organization man? Is he the indispensable man whose personal drive created a nuclear navy by the force of his indomitable will over the backs of reluctant admirals refusing to be dragged into the twentieth century; or the opportunist who capitalized on fate to build his own navy within the real Navy; or all of these? What influences shaped the ruthless zeal of this wisp of a man driven to unsurpassed heights of excellence in building a nuclear navy?

From his entry into the U.S. Naval Academy in June 1918, Rickover was in conflict with the aristocratic WASP aura of Annapolis. (His family, living in a poor American Jewish neighborhood in Chicago, had come to America from Maków, Poland. Young Rickover, at age six, traveling steerage, lived off a barrel of salted herring except when passengers threw oranges to him and other children looking up from the bowels of the ship.) Unfriendly and friendless, he soon learned to hate the Naval Academy and the Navy. Authors Norman Polmar and Thomas Allen raise the specter of anti-Semitism. An extremely unpopular midshipman, a 1922 class-mate of Rickover, also Jewish, found his picture in the yearbook at graduation inside the back cover, on a perforated page. The authors do not raise the point, but the same thing was to happen a decade later, in 1932, involving a similarly unpopular midshipman. A point of clarification is important, however.

Class standing is extremely important at the Naval Academy. It determines relative seniority in the Navy at graduation and the order in which one "makes his number" for future promotions as vacancies occur; both pay and seniority are involved. Class standings are also important to selection boards for war colleges and other competitive assignments throughout a career. If a midshipman reaches the top of his class through sheer brilliance—or perhaps favored by several years of university experience before entering—he is not ordinarily resented, but the grind who sacrifices athletics, girls, and other normal leisure pursuits to devote all his energy to academics is resented as a cutthroat who gains numbers in class standing—and future seniority in the Navy—by unfair competition, hence by cutting the throats of his classmates. Both "perforated page" incidents related to cutthroats; both were number 1 or 2 men in their class; both were selfish, abrasive personalities; and both happened to be Jewish.*

*In the 1932 incident, a younger brother entered the Academy as a plebe when his brother was a senior. An athlete and popular student, he experienced no hostility, confessing to the writer that even the family could not get along with the older brother.

Rickover stood far from the top of his class, but he was resented as a loner, a cutthroat with an abrasive personality, and he happened to be Jewish. Midshipmen represent a cross section of the nation; any anti-Semitism at the Academy reflects the nation at large. After all, three of the seven Jews in Rickover's class rose to flag rank, a percentage many, many times higher than normal. Nor was Hyman Rickover a practicing Jew; he married his first wife in an Episcopalian ceremony and was a devout follower of that faith; after her death he married his second wife in a Catholic ceremony. The authors conclude that Rickover "did not suffer" because he was Jewish and that neither the Academy nor the Navy was anti-Semitic—but the number of pages devoted to the topic overbalances the argument to the contrary.

In his naval service to midcareer, Rickover showed little promise of future greatness. He volunteered for submarine duty but was not a particularly good submariner. He rose to executive officer of the USS S-48 but was not selected for command. His pattern of sea and shore assignments up to the rank of captain was unimpressive. But in the fall of 1946 he saw nuclear power "as an opportunity for the Navy—and for himself." Chosen almost by chance for a four-month assignment to Oak Ridge, Tennessee, Rickover soon parlayed the opportunity into a fortuitous dual responsibility to the Atomic Energy Commission, later the Department of Energy, and the Navy. Playing one against the other, he used the exploding technology of nuclear power to project his own career.

Proving himself a master at bureaucratic infighting, he built his empire, sensing shrewdly what few others ever realized, that congressmen prefer giving money to people rather than institutions. Going before committees as an individual and not as a Navy official, he gave a strong and convincing impression that he spoke as a man of truth and right, not to support the U.S. Navy but for his nuclear navy. No witness attacked another flag officer or another Navy program; Rickover could and did. He told congressmen what they wanted to hear, things they said to each other but rarely heard from a government witness. "Those of us who have an objective, a desire to get something done, cannot possibly compromise and communicate all day long with people who wallow in bureaucracy, who worship rules and ancient routines." Thanks to outstanding preparation and delivery by a truly expert witness, his flawless performances generated their own fame in the press as a folksy, down-home philosopher.

Beneath the surface, however, was always the cold, unrelenting, ruthless workaholic, undermining the bureaucracy while creating his own. His was a management textbook for the inside operator, organized to the smallest detail, intolerant of error, devoting everything including his personal life to a cause, an obsession. Rickover established a constituency in Congress by superior salesmanship of his own product and skillful sowing of dissension and division in competing programs. Carefully slanting facts and covering up what he did not want disclosed, he skillfully manipulated his two bosses to become what the authors call "The Unaccountable Man." He destroyed any competing nuclear program within his own organization and any person likely to emerge as a competitor or successor. In time, he became increasingly conservative if not reactionary, putting space between himself and any responsibility for failure or accident. When the USS *Thresher* was lost in April 1963, he immediately phoned the Bureau of Ships to dissociate himself from any likelihood of failure of the nuclear plant in the incident. The bureau chief thought this action "thoroughly dishonest."

To an Armed Services Committee, he stated: "We have got somehow to drag the Navy into the Twentieth Century. From the beginning the Navy has opposed nuclear power." Yet the authors sought in vain for any opposition or even serious question about the construction of nuclear-powered submarines. But how else could he make himself—and the congressional committees—the indispensable ingredient

behind the reality of the nuclear program?

Admiral Rickover's greatest contribution was neither as a technician nor manager; his real genius lay in infusing into the Navy the pursuit of excellence, the genius not of breadth of vision but of the insistence on taking infinite pains in the smallest detail in the development of nuclear energy. He set high standards of excellence as the norm and forced compliance. One of his nuclear commanding officers asks,

Look around. Do you see excellence anywhere? In medicine? In law? Religion? Anywhere? We have abandoned excellence, sometimes wrongly, in the name of civil rights or equality. Don't get me wrong. I know our country is going in the right direction, in the main. We can't make demands on our citizens that go beyond what society as a whole is demanding.

In the nuclear program, Special Trust and Confidence, the traditional words on a U.S. military officer's commission, had no relevance. Everything and everyone was checked, rechecked, then checked again.

Only those with superior qualifications were considered for the nuclear program. Probing the minds and attitudes of potential officers and crewmen, the Rickover stamp reached every individual in the program. Over the years the famed interview became a legend. Ordeals of harassment, verbal abuse, banishment to a broom closet, demeaning indignities, and sometimes foul language—all sought to evaluate the individual under stress and to instill forever the conviction of who was boss.

Throughout the Rickover system, a fundamental process was at work, but it was neither the Young Turk nor the conventional image of the revolutionary. Vincent Davis claims that the naval innovator

simply does not give himself or his career a thought when he embarks on the advocacy process. His single-minded concern is to achieve what he views as a dramatic improvement in the Navy, and he does not calculate one way or the other what his crusade may do for or against his personal advancement.¹

The good professor recognized that Rickover might be an exception. The early Captain Rick-over could be identified as seeking "dramatic improvement in the Navy," less so for Admiral Rickover. And neither the captain nor the admiral sacrificed personal advancement.

From the early USS *Nautilus* days, the nuclear program was marked more and more by the growing cult of the individual. Personal advancement was not sacrificed; the nuclear program became the means of personal advancement; Rickover created his own navy within the submarine navy. An essential element of the cult was to make himself the indispensable man both in the Navy and in the program. Either to divide and conquer or to manipulate his constituency in the congressional committees, Rickover drove both the nuclear program and his own career, carrying his promotions beyond "the system" to the apex of four stars, then retention on active duty far beyond normal or even legal retirement limits. The bloody bureaucratic vendetta within the Bureau of Ships was only the background for his grand strategy: the nation must have an all nuclear navy; he would create and control it.

Within the nuclear program, subordinates who emerged as possible successors were purged. Admiral Ralph K. James, for four years Rickover's boss as Chief of the Bureau of Ships, stated that

. . . anyone who began to challenge him. . . wasn't long for the program. . . . He's arranged for the transfer out of the program, never to be reentered into it, any number of senior engineering duty officers who had tremendous technical capability, greater in many

measures than Rickover ever possessed. (p. 657)

The heart of that group was a half score of brilliant officers, mostly Naval Academy classmates of the reviewer, who perhaps, in their aggregate genius, stand unsurpassed in the annals of the U.S. military: Lou Roddis, Jim Dunford, Ned Beach, Marshall Turnbaugh, Eli Roth, Bob Laney, and Vince De Poix. Admiral James continued,

I have in mind at least four possible successors... who might have carried on with equal, if not greater, success because they wouldn't have been so brutal and wouldn't have achieved their pinnacle of success by stepping over the recumbent bodies of their associates, which was typical of the Rickover approach.

The cult of personality produced other adverse side effects. Having achieved brilliant success with the pressurized water coolant system in the *Nautilus* installation, innovation in other types of plants was stifled. The USS *Seawolf* plant, developed in tandem with *Nautilus*, utilized liquid sodium as coolant, promising much smaller and more compact reactors. Because of limitations in metallurgy, the system was unsuccessful. The program was scrapped, and its obvious superiorities were never again reexamined, even after twenty years of further progress in nuclear technology. Rickover put the kiss of death on programs generated within the Office of Naval Research and elsewhere for smaller, lightweight reactors that could reduce the enormous size and cost of nuclear-powered ships. None saw the light of day; all were thwarted as interference in his work. When nuclear power was adapted to surface use for large combatants such as aircraft carriers and missile cruisers, new systems apparently were not examined. For instance, a smaller and more efficient combination of nuclear power for normal cruising plus an overdrive of conventional gas turbine plants for high speed use had been proposed but was not investigated further.

One phase of the bureaucratic competition for dominance erupted in the Trident SLBM program to replace the aging Polaris/Poseidon submarines. The Special Projects Office under Admiral Levering Smith controlled the Polaris missile system and would freeze Rickover's Naval Reactors Branch out of the next generation of missile ships unless that system could be devised to require a new propulsion plant. Increasing the number of missiles from 16 to 24 per submarine, for example, would not suffice; the ship could be "stretched" just as jet aircraft have been modernized for new requirements and no new power plant would be required. Hence, increasing both the size and range of the missile so that it would no longer fit existing tubes became necessary in order to require a new propulsion plant for the much larger hull. Special Projects, the agency named originally for the Trident development, lacked the capability to develop reactors, and Rickover's Naval Reactors Branch quickly captured the project.

In an intensive case study of the Trident system, the Commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy found that the strategic requirement for the new system as conceived was strictly secondary.² Rather surprisingly, Polmar and Allen make no reference to this study in their always thorough, painstaking analysis.

The lack of an adequate research and development program for new propulsion techniques was only one indicator of the increasing conservatism of the Rickover program. Truly it has been said, "The father of the last technological revolution is in the ideal position to stamp out the next one." Lou Roddis notes that the Soviet development of the Alfa nuclear submarine, smaller, faster, and deeper diving than any U.S. undersea craft, has no counterpart in the U.S. development. The first commanding officer of the *Seawolf*, Captain Dick Laning, puts the problem well:

When a revolutionary succeeds he should be given five years and then shot. Or otherwise

removed. Because they then become vulnerable to the politics of failure and they cease to advance. They rest on their laurels. I think that's what happened to Rickover.

Indirectly, perhaps, this explains why nuclear physicist Edward Teller said, "I liked Rickover better as a captain than as an admiral."

The cult of personality and the dominance of the Rickover program tended increasingly to isolate the nuclear Navy officers from the real Navy. Brilliant, carefully selected, and meticulously trained, they are superb engineers but know little of the real Navy. The Rickover system trains engineers rather than professional naval officers. Through his insistence, the Naval Academy curriculum offers 80 percent of its courses in the hard sciences, 20 percent in the liberal arts. (West Point divides it 60-40; the Air Force Academy, 50-50.) Midcareer "nucs" were screened from war college assignments— despite the enormous influence they had to gain and to give—and from staff duties outside the narrow limits of their specializations as nuclear engineers. Nor could they be found even on submarine staffs, for example, seeking to develop tactics and doctrine for nuclear and missile submarines in both offensive and defensive roles.³ Shore duty of any sort is limited; of 1500 billets in the Navy for nuclear specialists, only 122 are ashore.

Nowhere does the cult of personality carry a more far-reaching, more insidious influence than in motivation and leadership. As former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Arleigh Burke stated, "They're taking top people who are fully capable, at the expense of all the other programs—and losing a large percentage of them in their damn program. . . . You get people not by giving them things. You get people by making them want to serve." Nuclear-trained officers and enlisted personnel were favored elites with higher pay and privileges, their pay higher even than the missile officers serving aboard nuclear submarines. Nuclear enlisted men never stand nonengineering watches, rarely if ever help load stores and weapons, never have mess-cook duty. As a result, second-class petty officers from the "front end" pull mess-cook duty, serving nuclear-trained third class from the engineering department. The consequences are obvious. The commanding officer of a nonnuclear guided-missile destroyer in the Persian Gulf recently wrote me, "If an officer thinks that 'professional emasculation' is not worth all the extra pay and benefits, of going to sea less than half his time in command, that's his choice. . . . We who can't afford to bribe our people to stay in must still use inspiration, creativity, and imagination." The inevitable result: "Pay increases and the continued high bonuses for nuclear qualified submarine officers led to a retention rate of about 33% during 1981—the worst for any category of naval officer."

Admiral Rickover made a great contribution to his country over an unsurpassed 63-year career of active service. Yet at the apex of his career, one would conclude that he evoked admiration rather than respect. Unlike most senior officers who retire in a blaze of ceremony and parades, he chose to pass up the traditional ritual and make his farewell on Capitol Hill. His swan song to the combined House and Senate Joint Economic Committees found only three members present. A grateful Congress struck a gold medal in his honor; again, only a handful of members was present. In the words of Senator Gary Hart on a similar occasion, "The mahogany cheered." Turning down President Reagan's invitation to serve as a consultant on civilian nuclear matters, this driven, lonely man, suddenly grown old and tired in the service, passed quietly from the scene.

Both Norman Polmar and Thomas B. Allen deserve high praise for balanced, even-handed, although controversial analysis. Polmar, distinguished naval analyst and author and editor of the U.S. section of *Jane's Fighting Ships* for a decade, is an expert on naval affairs and strategic weapons. Coauthor Allen has had long editorial experience as Associate Director of National Geographic Books and is a Navy veteran of the Korean War. Since Admiral Rickover was totally hostile to the publishing of his biography, the authors were forced into an overreliance on reams of congressional testimony and

interviews of both the bitter and worshipful.

Rickover is an important book on a highly significant subject. The professional officer, whatever his service affiliation, will find the study fascinating, sometimes unbelievable, but amply rewarding.

Arnold, Maryland

Notes

1. Vincent Davis, *The Politics of Innovation: Patterns in Navy Cases* (University of Denver International Studies, 1967), p. 35.
2. *Commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy* (Washington: Government Printing Office, June 1975), vol. 4, Appendix K, chapter 6.
3. For a further discussion of this point, see my "open letter" to Admiral Rickover, *Shipmate*, April 1974, pp. 19.22.

Contributor

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