

# Admiral Rickover: OUR MOST CANTANKEROUS PATRIOT

In a Navy popularity contest, the terrible-tempered "father of the atomic submarine"

By MARYA SAUNDERS

VICE ADM. Hyman George Rickover, "father of the atomic submarine," had good reason to feel proud on June 22, 1963: four nuclear-powered U. S. submarines were launched that day. But instead of celebrating, the silver-haired scientist strode glumly past reporters, his mouth clamped shut, his face expressionless.

Once again he was the center of a controversy! This one was similar to the famed Rickover case of 1952 when a Navy promotion board "passed over" his elevation to admiral for the second time (a decision that would have forced him to retire had Congress not intervened).

Now, 11 years later, Rickover's job was again in jeopardy. Navy regulations demanded his retirement after his 64th birthday, on Jan. 27, 1964. While powerful admirals whispered, "Good riddance," furious members of Congress threatened to pass special legislation to keep him on.

Finally, Fred Korth, then Secretary of the Navy, made an important announcement: Admiral Rickover must retire next February—but he immediately will be recalled to active duty.

Thanks to this kind of civilian intervention, the Navy has a nuclear fleet including destroyers, cruisers, and an aircraft carrier and is launching Polaris missile-firing subs at the rate of almost one a month. Barring delays, Rickover's goal of 41 will be reached by 1965. This is more than three times the number of missile-firing nuclear subs now being deployed by Russia.

Who is this controversial engineering genius who has reshaped modern naval warfare? Why should the Navy want to jettison a man who has done so much to keep America strong? From these questions emerge the fascinating story of one of America's greatest but most cantankerous patriots, a dedicated 110-pound bundle of driving energy whose outspoken criticism of American industry, education, and armed forces has stirred a hundred bitter controversies.

As head of nuclear divisions of the Navy and of the Atomic Energy Commission, Rickover uses his sharp, critical tongue to cut through pretense and confusion. Thousands of young Navy officers grimace when they recall the Admiral's famous Saturday interviews (called in some Navy circles, "the Big Death"), in which he probes volunteers for the nuclear program.

The way a man thinks interests Rickover more than his answers, and he uses amusing theatrical effects to shake interviewees into action. He has a special chair for them with one leg shorter than the rest, and he sets it so the sunlight hits the man in the eyes. "He wants to see if you're

might finish last—but his vigor and vision are helping America maintain its military supremacy

resourceful enough to move the chair and put a matchbook under the leg," a recruit explained. One young applicant reported this exchange with the Admiral. "How would you improve the Navy?" snapped Rickover.

"By getting rid of all the paper work," the officer replied. He explained that he filed monthly reports that he felt no one ever read.

"Why don't you just stop submitting them?" "Can't do it," the young man said. "The commanding officer's secretary keeps a 'tickler' file and reminds me to get the report in."

"Well," said the Admiral, "why don't you take your 'tickler' card out of the 'tickler' file?"

Three days later Rickover received a telegram which read, "Tickle completed." The officer was accepted instantly.

Rickover, who believes people produce more in Spartan surroundings, has ripped the carpets out of his soundproofed Washington office. On the wall is a framed quotation from Proverbs: "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

## The Admiral Sets the Pace

"The Admiral's a small man," one of his staff said, "but when you go into his office he seems 10 feet tall." There everything moves at top speed—telephones ring, subordinates come and go in streams. Rickover may be dictating to two secretaries simultaneously while reading carbons of earlier letters and scrawling last-minute comments. At 4 p.m. he may dash to the airport, fly to the Groton, Conn., Navy base, hold night conferences with government contractors, then take a sleeper to Washington and show up for work by 8 a.m. On weekends he sometimes travels as far as California. Somehow he also manages to turn up for evenings at home with his wife.

"Once a man survives the rugged training," a Nuclear Power School graduate said, "he discovers the old man is an extremely intelligent guy, informed on many subjects, as well as a generous man capable of great compassion."

A number of years ago, the young son of a submarine commander fell into a neighbor's pool and drowned. When Rickover heard of the tragedy, he opened his Bible to an appropriate passage and telephoned the commander.

When the father answered the phone, Rickover started to read from the Bible. On the last word of the verse, he hung up without identifying himself. But the commander had recognized Rickover's gentle voice immediately.

Later, explaining the Admiral's unorthodox behavior to a friend, he said, "Rickover's mission was to try to ease my grief. He'd chosen the Bible passage for that purpose. It would have wasted time to introduce himself first. Then, when he'd finished reading, he could think of nothing to say that was better than the Bible—so he hung up."

Rickover's tremendous sense of responsibility for his men takes many forms. When the nuclear

submarine *Thresher* sank, the Admiral knew that psychologically it was a crucial moment for the crews in the sub program. Calmly he announced to the press, "We are going on with sea trials in the normal way," and boarded the *Andrew Jackson*, the first nuclear sub to be tested following the loss of the *Thresher*. The sub submerged beneath the waters off Mare Island, Calif. Thirty-six hours later, Rickover issued the terse verdict, "Successfully completed initial trials."

Rickover knows every inch of his ships and demands that his men do, too. Early in the program, the Admiral was in a sub when a pipe fitting failed. Only his lightning-quick actions brought the ship safely to shore. After an intensive investigation, he discovered certain metals failed under salt-water pressure because manufacturers were not following his precise demands. To stop future failures, Rickover gave each commander a magnet and told him to crawl through his ship and check every nut and bolt for its metal content. These men now attribute much of the nuclear program's remarkable safety record to their visionary Admiral's stringent testing of people and equipment.

Born in 1900 in Makowa, a small, predominantly Jewish village in Russian Poland, young Hyman was six when his family escaped across Germany. During the long trip, they slept in bleak dormitories and were often hungry. When the future admiral saw his first ships at Antwerp, he burst into tears. "The boats were so big," his sister recalled, "they frightened him!"

## Family Rule: Hard Work, No Waste

By 1910 his parents had settled in Chicago with their two daughters and son. His father, a tailor, ran a strict and frugal household where waste was severely punished. Hyman was a stubborn boy, and his father once had to chip away at his son's front teeth in order to force medicine down his throat.

All through high school, the boy had an eight-hour-a-day job as a Western Union messenger. Like his father (who died at his workbench three years ago at the age of 85, despite being comfortably well off), Hyman Rickover can say proudly that he has worked hard all his life. After the Admiral's heart attack in 1961, one of his men said, "It has slowed him down considerably—now he only works 15 hours a day."

Rick, as he was called at Annapolis, received his appointment to the Naval Academy in 1918. The Annapolis experience was traumatic. He wasn't a good athlete, had a limit of \$2 a month spending money, and found it hard to be accepted socially by Academy cliques. So he withdrew to his room and read constantly.

By the time he was graduated, Rick had declared war against what he called the "stupidity" of the Navy, its "red tape," and its "slipshod ways." He announced that the shortest distance between two points was a straight line (even if it bi-

sected six admirals) and proceeded to rack up one of the stormiest and most undiplomatic careers in naval history.

His distaste for naval social functions was renowned. Once, when he was an electrical officer on the battleship *U.S.S. Nevada*, her captain strode into Rick's office and ordered him to attend a party being given by an admiral on a nearby flagship. "And get into a dress uniform with the proper rank on it!" the captain barked.

Boarding the ship that evening, Rickover went through the receiving line, firmly shook the Admiral's hand, and kept walking straight to the other side of the ship. He clambered down the ladder and stepped into a launch. Within half an hour, he was back at work in his office.

Rickover's family weren't outwardly affectionate, but they were loyal—and this is how he treated the Navy. He castigated it so often that his superiors would have been amazed to hear his speech praising the Navy before a group of students at Columbia University in 1929.



Admiral Rickover shows Frol Kozlov, Soviet Deputy Premier, America's first atomic power plant.

One impressed listener was Ruth D. Masters, a scholarship student of international law from Washington, D.C. Ruth and Rick, who was getting his master's degree in electrical engineering, soon were studying together in the libraries. Voracious readers, they only stopped long enough to go to the opera, then to all the shows in town. Ruth left for a year at the University of Paris—and by that time Rickover was in love.

The Admiral, who is earnestly religious in a nonsectarian sense, knew his parents resented his drifting away from their close-knit environment. He wrote them a letter explaining that he no longer felt he could consider himself exclusively Jewish in faith and that he was going to marry a Christian. A later generation might not have taken this so hard, but Rickover's parents did not forgive him for many years.

When Ruth returned, they were married and honeymooned on the beaches of the submarine

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