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# Nation owes Adm. Rickover

June 28 1987

Adm. Hyman G. Rickover died a year ago, but he left in his wake an impression at the Idaho Naval Reactors Facility that will live forever.

Rickover was 86 when he died July 8, 1986, of apparent natural causes in Arlington, Va., a suburb of Washington, D.C. He had earlier suffered heart attacks and a stroke.

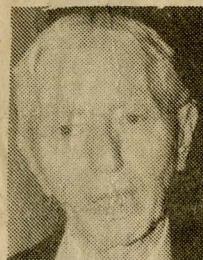
It is recalled that in 1983 three former presidents, the present one noticeably absent, paid homage to the aging admiral at the nation's capital. Former presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter and 500 others paid \$1,000 each to honor the admiral, widely known as the father of the American nuclear navy.

A frequent visitor here in earlier years, Rickover came to the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory less often before he was involuntarily retired by President Reagan. Veteran members of Congress mourned his death, even though they were never spared by his candor. Congress twice awarded him its gold medal for exceptional service, the only one accorded such an honor except Zachary Taylor.

It was Rickover who once interviewed a young Navy officer, Jimmy Carter, for the Navy's new nuclear submarine program.

Rickover is credited with the efforts that led to the building of the nuclear-powered Nautilus in 1954. He guided the United States to dominance in naval nuclear propulsion until the Soviets caught up in the early 70s.

Nixon, Ford and Carter kept Rickover on board well beyond the mandatory retirement age of 62. Not so Reagan. He brusquely replaced him Jan. 31, 1981. In fact, he didn't even send a message or representative to



Hyman Rickover

the Rickover honor dinner.

Rickover was quoted as saying at the event, "I do not believe I have done enough for my country. I did what I wanted, and was paid well for my work."

Rickover served in the Navy 63 years and under 13 presidents, longer than any naval officer in history.

A deceptively frail-looking man, he expressed at a congressional hearing in 1982 a frank resentment over his forced retirement, insisting he could still do the job. He curtly rejected being kicked upstairs as a White House naval advisor.

It took an act of Congress to enable Rickover to serve nearly 20 years past the retirement deadline. He was granted repeated two-year extensions, much to the annoyance of many high-ranking naval officers, including those at INEL.

He survived many attempts to oust him, mainly because of powerful friends in Congress. These included Idaho's Sen. Frank Church and Washington state's Sen. Henry Jackson.

Even now, hundreds of sailors who roam the seven seas of the world in nuclear crafts were trained at the Idaho NRF.

Rickover rarely granted interviews. However, he asked to be interviewed by this writer on Oct. 7, 1979, before visiting the INEL for one of his last times. At that time he predicted work at the NRF would continue to increase over the next several years, which indeed has been the case.

Rickover wanted the interview mainly to praise Church, then chairman of the Senate subcommittee on energy research and development and chairman of the prestigious Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Rickover wanted to help Church in his bitter 1980 re-election campaign against Republican Steve Symms. Church lost anyway.

At that time, Rickover reported there were about 900 civilians, 550 naval staff and a training class of about 600 at the NRF.

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NRF authorities now report the training classes have doubled to about 1,200 for every six weeks, plus 400 more for naval staff.

In the Idaho Falls interview, Rickover even had answers typed to questions he felt were going to be asked.

He often said he distrusted most of the news media and rarely granted interviews, saying curtly "newspapers never get things right anyway." He repeatedly refused interviews to *The Washington Post*, *New York Times* and other large influential daily Eastern papers.

INEL naval officers were candid in saying they breathed sighs of relief when Rickover was forced to retire as they no longer had to face words from his sharp tongue. There is little question he truly ran a tight ship.

The NRF was one of his favorite projects and he made sure the Navy toed the line.

In fact, Jimmy Carter, a lieutenant and graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, often visited the NRF as an underling of Rickover.

When Carter became president in 1976, it was believed the NRF and INEL would receive a boost because of his close association with the installation. But the opposite was actually the case because Carter opted an anti-nuclear policy, surprising as it may seem.

Ford's son, Jack, also served with the Navy contingent at the INEL for a short time.

Reagan also had a close connection with INEL about 25 years ago when it was known as the National Reactor Training Station. He was then a glib sales representative for General Electric, which at that time operated the Aircraft Propulsion Program that was later juked as a failure. Reagan addressed a dinner meeting in Idaho Falls at that time and also was interviewed as a bright talkative salesman.

It was Church, however, who kept the INEL in a strong position and it grew gradually. It was Idaho's Rep. Orval Hansen then a House member

of a special Atomic Energy Committee, who also took a keen interest and had it renamed to the INEL to more clearly identify itself with its present role.

Rickover repeatedly challenged the authority of every chief of naval operations, secretary of defense and every president except Carter, who was a loyal protege to the end.

At the end, the Pentagon sounded a sour note even after his retirement. Navy Secretary John Lehman publicly censured him for accepting \$67,628 in gifts over the years from General Dynamics Corp., which built the nuclear submarines and ships developed on Rickover's drawing board. Rickover, always forthright, acknowledged taking the gifts, but said in turn he gave most of them to others, including members of Congress. Worldly goods were not of much interest to the dedicated Rickover.

Rickover was quoted as saying "I obeyed all orders that I agreed with," but it was apparent he didn't agree with many.

While in Idaho, Rickover was fond of remarking that Navy men liked Idaho girls, and frequently married them. It is still common.

Rickover said frequently, including in his last interview here, "the (Navy) boys can't resist the beauty and tenderness of the girls from Idaho."

Of the 539 members of the class of 1922 at the U.S. Naval Academy, Rickover was graduated 106th. He was controversial in that he was irascible, abrasive, dedicated and a brilliant nonconformist who consistently flouted the tradition and ways of the Navy's rigid bureaucracy.

He ran roughshod over his superiors in getting the nuclear Navy, a feat that placed the United States at the top as a world naval power at that time.

For that, the nation owes him eternal gratitude.

(*Ben Plastino is a Post-Register columnist.*)