The nuclear scene

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Rickover recognition recalls INEL impact

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Without much fanfare, three former presidents, the present one noticeably absent, recently paid homage to the aging admiral who had a resounding impact on the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory.

Admiral Hyman G. Rickover

Former Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter and 500 others paid $1,000 each to honor retired Admiral Hyman G.Rickover, widely known as the father of the American nuclear Navy.

A frequent visitor in earlier years, Rickover has visited the INEL less often in recent years. His secretive visits, however, were enough to make the Navy brass shiver.

The dinner, which was held earlier in the month, was a fund-raiser held to get the new Rickover Foundation off to a booming start. The foundation has been set up to encourage promising young people to study mathematics, science, philosophy and English literature, with scholarsips and youth programs.

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

He 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, Carter and Ford kept Rickover on board well beyond the mandatory retirement age of 62. President Reagan replaced him Jan. 31, 1981, with Vice Admiral Kinnard R. McKee, 53, also a naval nuclear expert.

Reagan did not send a message or representative to the Rickover function.

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

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Rickover served in the Navy 63 years, longer than any naval officer in history.

In congressional hearings a year ago, Rickover, a deceptively frail naval officer, expressed frank resentment over his forced retirement. He insisted he could still do the job.

He curtly rejected being kicked upstairs to a White House advisory position.

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, but a year ago his luck ran out.

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

Rickover rarely granted interviews but he even asked for one of this writer on Oct. 7, 1979, after visiting the INEL. At that time he predicted work at the Naval Reactor Facility would continue to increase over the next several years, which indeed has been the case.

Rickover wanted the interview mainly to praise Church, who then was chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Energy Research and Development and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Rickover reported there were about 900 civilians, 550 naval staff and a training class of about 800 at the NRF, figures which have remained fairly stable in recent years.

In fact, Rickover had answers to questions he felt were going to be asked typed out in advance.

He distrusted most of the news media and rarely granted interviews, saying curtly "newspapers never get things right anyway."

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Perhaps the INEL naval officers are breathing sighs of relief because they would no longer have to avoid the sharp-tongued Rickover. There is little question he ran a tight ship.

The INEL naval installation 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, also visited the INEL.

When he became president it was believed the INEL would receive a boost because of his association with it, but the opposite was the case because Carter adopted an anti-nuclear policy.

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

Reagan also had a connection with INEL about 20 years ago when he was a sales representative for General Electric. GE at that time managed the huge INEL aircraft propulsion program that was later terminated. Reagan addressed a dinner meeting here at that time and was interviewed.

It was Church, however, who kept the INEL in a strong position and allowed it to grow substanially. Since his departure from Congress, however, the INEL has lost a little ground, due apparently to opposition to nuclear energy.

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

Even at the recent party, Rickover was quoted as saying "I obeyed all orders that I agreed with," but it was apparent he didn't agree with many of them.

Rickover was fond of remarking that Navy men liked Idaho girls, and frequently married them.

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

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

For that, the nation owes him eternal gratitude.