
An Achiever's Lot

Norman Polmar and Thomas B. Allen:
Rickover; Simon & Schuster; New
York.

by Otto J. Scott

Some years ago, Norman Polmar, a distinguished naval analyst and editor of the U.S. section of *Jane's Fighting Ships*, authored *The Death of the Thresher*, which describes a nuclear-powered submarine that sank in the Atlantic in 1963 with the loss of 129 men. In his description of this tragedy, Polmar indicated that the problems of the *Thresher* may have started with the failure of its nuclear reactor. Admiral Rickover, angered by the imputation that an area under his control might have been fallible, informed Polmar that he, Rickover, would never again have anything to do with the author. That dismissal—and insult—might have been one of Hyman George Rickover's more significant errors. For Norman Polmar eventually teamed up with Thomas B. Allen to produce an exhaustive examination of Rickover. It seems unlikely that Rickover's reputation—which for many years was as untouchable (at least officially) as those of J. Edgar Hoover and Major-General Lewis B. Hershey, men "whose tenure was beyond control of logic or reason"—will ever again look as admirable as it once did.

The authors detail numerous anecdotes that reveal a man bristling with paradoxical positions; Rickover, who fulminated against political influence, social status, and favoritism all his life, was himself, it's shown, the nation's most outstanding example of all three. That Rickover enjoyed a special status is well known; what is less well known but deserves examination is that he continued to act like an abused and martyred person while actually wielding autocratic

Mr. Scott is a frequent contributor to these pages.

and unchecked authority. This contradiction is not unknown; Latin Americans refer to persons who move upward on the societal scale from a modest to a powerful position while retaining the emotional and political attitudes of their origins as being "complexed." In the future, the figure of Rickover may serve as a prototype of the genus in our society.

If that were all that could be said of the historical Rickover, however, it would hardly merit the enormous tome that Polmar and Allen have produced. Rickover's claim for enduring historical importance is based upon his influence over and within the United States Navy. It is here that the expertise of the authors becomes apparent. They have examined official and unofficial files, public and private records, media sources; they have interviewed Rickover's allies and protégés as well as his critics and opponents. In the course of this exercise they establish that Rickover was neither the first nor the only Naval officer to champion the cause of nuclear-powered submarines and surface vessels. The Navy was sufficiently interested in the nuclear approach to establish a special branch for it as early as 1939, and it pursued the effort diligently, though behind the scenes, throughout World War II—a period when Rickover was assigned to various naval shipyards.

That information is no great surprise to anyone acquainted with the exaggerations that distort the subject of nuclear energy. Dr. Vannevar Bush, coordinator of the U.S. scientific program in World

War II, could never overcome his irritation and astonishment that a letter from Albert Einstein to FDR was credited by the media with launching the U.S. atomic-energy program. "By the time that letter was sent," Bush growled, "we had been busy for quite a while." That is true. But it is also true that Einstein's great prestige helped convince significant persons in Congress and elsewhere that the program deserved complete and unquestioning support—and that was more than Dr. Bush could have achieved with a letter. It was not Einstein but his admirers who launched that myth; he was, in other words, used to forward a venture which proved highly successful. Hyman Rickover created his own myth—with the help of the media. His myth was that he created the Navy's nuclear program against great odds, when in fact he was transferred into an ongoing program created by the Bureau of Ships and the Atomic Energy Commission, and he had extraordinary support and cooperation.

In the course of managing the Naval reactor program, Rickover proved to be efficient but difficult. Nevertheless, he had supporters with high Naval rank, and members of Congress were impressed with him. His appearances on the Hill were effective, and funds for nuclear-powered vessels were allocated with little argument. Rickover's relations with the press were also very cordial, and he accumulated an impressive batch of clippings. One special admirer was Clay Blair, Jr., a staff member of *Time-Life*, to

In the Mail

The Trans-Atlantic Crisis: A Conference of the Committee for the Free World; The Orwell Press; New York. One thing is clear from the lively papers and exchanges: the noun *crisis* should be in the plural form.

James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery by Drew Gilpin Faust; Louisiana State University Press; Baton Rouge. Confounds the stereotype of the plantation owner as a julep-sipping boor.

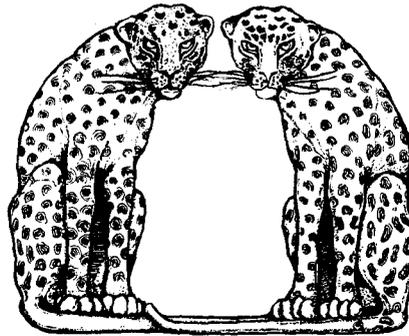
whom Rickover was a hero. When Rickover was passed over for promotion to Rear Admiral and faced retirement, Blair decided that Rickover was being treated unjustly. In order to develop this theme he was given a Naval office and a secretary by Rickover, who acted as editor for an encomium that Blair produced. A full-scale, and ultimately successful, campaign was launched. Implicit in this campaign was the argument that Rickover was, and had for years been, a victim of anti-Semitism. This claim of prejudice was accepted by many, and it spread throughout the nation. It gained credibility when Rickover's Annapolis years were confused with those of his classmate, Leonard Kaplan. Kaplan competed against one of the most popular of all Annapolis students, a star athlete and scholar; he was, apparently because of anti-Semitism exacerbated by personality collisions, sent into Coventry. In the yearbook of Rickover's class, Kaplan's photograph appeared on an unnumbered, perforated page. It is remarkable that after such an experience Kaplan proceeded with a respectable Naval career. His son later entered the same service.

The Kaplan episode occurred in the 1920's; it could not have occurred in the postwar 50's, when not only anti-Semitism, but such ugly manifestations of injustice and dislike against any individual, were relegated to partisans of the lunatic fringe. Rickover's failure to achieve promotion from the Review Board seems, as Senator Javits said, "more a Billy Mitchell case than a Dreyfus case." In other words, it was not Rickover's origins that were involved, but his acerbic and competitive relationship with the leaders of the Navy—a matter of discipline and differences over policy.

That the charge of prejudice worked in Rickover's favor and cast his critics in an unenviable light was only one consequence of the Blair/Rickover campaign. A more lasting result was that his critics were silenced lest they be judged guilty of malignity. A great media uproar caused the Review Board (for perhaps the first time in Naval history) to reconsider.

Rickover became a Rear Admiral.

From then on Rickover was barely controllable by Naval authority. Polmar and Allen compare his appearances before Congress with those of J. Edgar Hoover. It has been said that Hoover's power was based upon private information, but the fact seems to be that until his last years, Hoover was maintained by



the press. Much the same appears to have been true for Rickover. And, bearing out Acton's aphorism, Rickover succumbed to the heady sensation of being able to tell his titular bosses to go to hell whenever the spirit moved him. Rickover's behavior grew bizarre. He rarely wore a uniform, and then only in response to special, official orders. His subordinates did not wear uniforms either, and the authors make it clear that Rickover would not have approved of the habit of dressing in one. Rickover could choose men on all levels to be transferred to his branch, could keep them beyond the Navy's official rotation time applied to all other branches, and could use them as he saw fit, without regard to rank. Under Rickover, a commander might take orders from a lieutenant. Dissidents were treated in a manner unknown in the rest of the Navy or civilian life. Even as he exercised tyrannical power, Rickover would describe himself as persecuted, struggling against tremendous odds, hampered by a mentally deficient Navy leadership.

These tactics were remarkably successful. Rickover rose to full Admiral, and his career continued into his eighties. He

was a service politician who used the media, general myth, and existing prejudice against tradition and brass hats to distort Naval procedures, to elevate his favorites and disgrace those he disliked in ways that went beyond all the rules, regulations, and accepted standards. His cruelty toward persons who incurred his disfavor is described by the authors and makes unpleasant reading. Admiral Zumwalt, who battled Rickover unsuccessfully, in his autobiography *On Watch* included an account of the humiliating tactics Rickover used.

Zumwalt's main argument, however, is that Rickover injured the Navy by twisting its priorities, using excessive funds in nuclear-powered ship construction, and thus kept the Navy from developing other equally essential vessels. Only a full-scale war will disclose whether Zumwalt is correct or not. What is beyond argument is that Rickover worked in demonic fashion to build nuclear vessels.

Former President Jimmy Carter, who is proud of having been accepted into Rickover's branch (a distinction equivalent to being accepted on a chattel slave block), did not have the sense or the courage to retire the Admiral. Nor did Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, or Lyndon Johnson. Rickover retained his media alliance until his eccentricities expanded into a loathing for television and journalists, and into reckless expressions of this prejudice. Before that, though, Rickover had enraged the nation's educators by a series of attacks on public education (mostly well-deserved), and infuriated many others by his engineer's dream of a scientific elite cast in his own image.

Until he achieved unreasonable authority, Rickover seems to have been a classic engineer with all the virtues and deficiencies of that calling. He was expert at handling inanimate objects, off the mark in dealing with human beings other than Congressmen or journalists. In his last years he fell into disputes with shipbuilding firms, contractors, and nearly everyone with whom he came in

contact. As a man, he was a harsh critic but unable to accept the faintest criticism. He seems to have forgiven any fault or excess in himself, but could not forgive or forget anyone who crossed him. Vociferous against favoritism, he was the greatest favorite in the history of the United States Navy. Disdainful of social sets, he seems to have been unaware of the fact that he was the representative of

a powerful American group and the beneficiary of its connections. Scornful of the earned rank and privileges of others, he energetically protested any slight to his own rank or privileges. Hyman Rickover was a man who took advantage of every situation, but who, nevertheless, managed to achieve a nuclear-powered Navy that may, in the oncoming crisis, save the United States of America. □

For sane, one may substitute "good," "life-affirming," and, of course, "moral." The true artist does not simply hold a mirror up to nature. He magnifies the good, diminishes the bad, ameliorates mankind.

This, one may assume, is the task that Gardner, as moral artist, set out to accomplish in *Mickelsson's Ghosts*. One may also assume that this was to be a "major"—not "minor"—work since the situations described are hardly trivial. Rather, for one man to experience them all in one year's time, they more resemble the fantastic, even the absurd. Mickelsson, an eminent philosophy professor, is beginning his tenure at the State University of New York at Binghamton. He has left Brown University, his psychiatrist, and his ex-wife (with her young lover) in Providence, where he was known to walk the streets while dressed in a crimson coat and talk to dead animals. Though both his wife and the Internal Revenue Service are vying for a sum which is several thousand dollars more per year than Mickelsson earns—his wife for alimony and the IRS for back taxes—he nonetheless buys a dilapidated old house in Susquehanna County and painstakingly restores it. The house is haunted, and Peter Mickelsson is "haunted" himself. He hears the ghosts, he sees them, he dreams about them—one is never sure with Mickelsson what is dream and what is hallucination. (The ghosts, too, have had hard lives: sister and brother, they've had an incestuous relationship which culminates in a murder-suicide.) Mickelsson is alternately—or simultaneously—in love with a beautiful, brilliant sociology professor and with a teenage Susquehanna prostitute. He nearly kills a man and is nearly murdered himself by a soft-spoken fellow philosophy professor who also happens to be a member of a Mormon assassination team.

These are not trivial situations. Yet these are situations surrounded by so much trivia in the form of unnecessary detail that, like poor Mickelsson in the

Overblown Fiction & Urban Renewal

John Gardner: *Mickelsson's Ghosts*;
Alfred A. Knopf; New York.

Jimmy Breslin: *Forsaking All Others*;
Simon & Schuster; New York.

by Linda Thorne

September 14, 1982 was a television newscaster's dilemma: two notable figures suddenly and violently dead and the question of which story to lead with. One Chicago station flashed on the screen first Princess Grace's picture, then the ravaged streets of Beirut. Although the rubble and dead bodies were sadly familiar sights, this time death was not anonymous; it had a name: Bashir Gemayel. Later in the broadcast came the news of another sudden and violent death on that day: novelist John Gardner, 49, after a motorcycle accident in Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania.

The next day's newspapers brought retrospectives on all three lives, Gardner's, of course, further back and accomplished with fewer words. The *Washington Post's* feature quoted Gardner from an interview conducted last July. Speaking on himself and his art, he said:

You know, I think I'm a really great artist. . . . It's the same as motorcycle racing. You believe in something and

Ms. Thorne is a staff writer at the University of Chicago.

you push it and you just don't worry about what's going to happen.

This statement was apparently a reply to his critics' lukewarm or negative reviews of *Mickelsson's Ghosts*. The metaphor proved to be a tragic one. Though the telling of *Mickelsson's Ghosts* may be compared to a motorcycle race in which the twists and turns often seem careless and the finish line ill-defined, Gardner, whether or not he actually viewed the artist as motorcyclist, held definite opinions on the role of the artist vis-à-vis his audience. Somewhere between *October Light* (which won the 1977 National Book Critics Circle Award) and *Mickelsson's Ghosts*, John Gardner published a book on literary criticism titled *On Moral Fiction*. Beyond (or besides) being a motorcyclist, Gardner believed, the true artist is a moralist, seeking to improve life.

The true artist's purpose, and the purpose of the true critic after him, is to show what is healthy, in other words *sane*, in human seeing, thinking, and feeling, and to point out what is not. He may point out what is central to the healthy function of the human spirit—he may deal with morals—in which case his work, if it is successful, is major; or he may point out what is healthy and unhealthy in relatively trivial situations—he may deal with morality as it is reflected in manners—in which case his work is minor.