

# Hyman George Rickover

1900–1986



**WHY HE MADE HISTORY** Admiral Hyman George Rickover supported the concept of a “nuclear Navy.” He offered some of the first ideas for using nuclear power for purposes other than weaponry.



*As you read the biography below, think about Rickover’s goal. How did he go about reaching that goal? In your opinion, was he successful?*



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The advance of nuclear weapons changed life for the military and for civilians in the 1950s. The Truman administration worked to educate the public in civil defense. Military and scientific authorities began to understand the short- and long-term damage done by nuclear reactions.

Hyman Rickover saw more in nuclear energy than a force to destroy enemies. He saw a source of power, power that could be used productively and peacefully. He believed that nuclear power could provide electricity to homes and businesses across the country and, even more importantly, in the “nuclear Navy.”

Hyman Rickover was born in 1900, the son of Polish immigrants. He graduated from the United States Naval Academy and later earned an advanced degree in electrical engineering from Columbia University. At the end of World War II, Rickover began to work on the development of nuclear-powered submarines. By the late 1940s scientific advances were making nuclear reactors smaller and smaller. In a program sponsored by the Navy, Rickover was put in charge of a program for developing reactors small enough to be used in submarines. Nuclear powered submarines, he argued, would not need to surface for refueling. He oversaw development of nuclear submarines that could stay submerged for months. These submarines ran with almost no noise and could travel under the polar ice caps. During this time, he was promoted to rear admiral.

The first of these submarines, *Nautilus*, was built and launched in early 1955. At the same time, Rickover oversaw the building of the first nuclear power plant for peaceful, civilian use. Today, because of Rickover’s foresight and intense training programs for crews, more than 150 U.S. Navy ships operate on nuclear power. These ships have logged an impressive record of accident-free operation.

In his later years, Rickover was criticized by some scientists. Rather than develop reactors to fit smaller submarines, Rickover insisted that submarines be large enough to carry nuclear reactors. In his work he alienated many people. Rickover was outspoken. Some said he was dictatorial. President Ronald Reagan forced Rickover to retire in 1982 after the admiral clashed with the president's administration on the subject of defense budgets and contracts.

In his last appearance before Congress, in 1982, Rickover expressed concerns about the use of nuclear power. The man known as the father of the U.S. nuclear navy referred to his nuclear submarines as "a necessary evil" helping to maintain the balance of power. His final assessment: "I think the human race is going to wreck itself, and it is important we get control of this horrible [nuclear] force and try to eliminate it."

Admiral Rickover died in 1986 and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

**WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**

1. **Explain** What were Hyman Rickover's early beliefs about the uses of nuclear power?

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2. **Identify Cause and Effect** How would you explain the change in Rickover's position on the topic of nuclear power in his later years?

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**ACTIVITY**

Research the effects of atomic and nuclear technology on the American culture in the 1950s. How did people respond to the possibility of a nuclear war or accident? You might consider anti-nuclear groups and slogans, origins of the peace sign, anti-war songs or poetry, or novels and movies about the consequences of nuclear war. Create a symbol, song, or poem that reflects the attitudes of the times.