



Book Review

Admiral Hyman Rickover: Engineer of Power
by Marc Wortman

Review by Kalman Goldstein

Admiral Hyman George Rickover was born Chaim Godalia Rykower in a Polish *stetl*, but became the most long-serving Navy officer in US history, famous, respected, and feared. He was domineering, demanding, disrespectful; brilliant, innovative, and indispensable. He broke every rule he thought stupid, ignored every Naval custom he believed outmoded, and nursed every real or imagined grievance. A non-observant Jew, he was snubbed by antisemites; he returned their insults. He never held a battle command, but created our modern, premier nuclear Navy. Admiral Rickover was an extremely complex, combative man; according to Marc Wortman he lived by John Adams' dictum: "I have long learned that a man may give offense and yet succeed."

Growing up poor in Chicago, he achieved an appointment to Annapolis by impressing Jewish Congressman Adolph Sabath while delivering telegrams. As a Jew, he was ostracized during his years at Annapolis; in turn he would snub fellow officers, especially those who called him "Hyman" (too close to "Hymie"). Friends knew to call him George or "Rick". Sent to Columbia University to train as an engineer, and then assigned a shore billet, he could not assume a career-building command at sea, especially during WWII; he retaliated by refusing to wear a uniform. When Navy bureaucrats pressed him for an organizational chart, he sent one full of Chinese characters. Energized by the developing Cold War, he got approval to create a hub of applied nuclear energy research, which by 1952 had built the first nuclear submarine. When uninvited to the launching of *USS Nautilus*, he elbowed his way onto the platform, in his business suit. President Eisenhower forced the Navy to promote him, overruling its prior blackball. Throughout his career he would cultivate politicians in contrast to his disdain for fellow officers, and, from Dwight Eisenhower to Jimmy Carter, they annually overruled the Navy's mandatory retirement age. Carter, his former student, brought Rickover unofficially into his administration; Rickover would help write some of his speeches. Ironically, this would earn him the ire of Ronald Reagan, who finally forced his resignation at age 83.

Wortman proceeds judiciously in explaining how Rickover shaped the modern Navy over two generations, despite his flinty individualism within a hierarchical institution. Rickover was a pugnacious Jew, but Wortman avoids labeling all his enemies or critics as antisemites. Rickover's behavior was often a response to bigotry, but it also flew in the face of everything the officer corps held dear in naval tradition. His heresy was shaped by advanced degrees in engineering: he became convinced that innovation, technology, and nuclear energy would render the "wind and spray" Navy obsolete. Since he was proven correct, his critics had to swallow and accept his insubordination. The creator of a nuclear navy, requiring new skills, he trained young naval officers to expect the unexpected and react appropriately. One of his most notorious training techniques was to seat candidates in chairs with legs of different lengths and observe how they responded. Besides support from powerful congressmen and senators like Herbert Lehman and Henry "Scoop" Jackson, Rickover would earn grudging respect from a few senior admirals, like Arleigh Burke and Chester Nimitz, for his refusal to bow to custom. His frequent appearances before Congress did deliver hefty budget allocations, and his expertise dealing with civilian contractors prevented shoddy work; their executives had to ride along on shakedown cruises.