

Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge - Oak Ridge's Transition to Peace, Part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of December 8, 2025)

Barbara Scollin, grandniece of Major General Kenneth D. Nichols, continues her series on his life.

Ample reasons, most notably leadership skills, personality traits and qualifications, led to choosing General (then Colonel) Kenneth D. Nichols as Deputy District Engineer and subsequently as District Engineer of the Manhattan Engineer District (MED). The responsibility of his position during World War II was massive as he oversaw a workforce of both military and civilian personnel of approximately 125,000.

His Oak Ridge office became the center of the wartime atomic energy's activities. He also was responsible for internal security operations in the production facilities that helped keep the development of the atomic bomb secret.

Following the war, Nichols kept close watch over the MED's production facilities as well as atomic weapon stockpiles until handing over responsibility to the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). In New York, assisting the American representative to the U.N. Atomic Energy Commission, Nichols made numerous presentations to UN delegates on certain treaty provisions that were very successful in gaining support for international control of atomic energy.

Ordered back to Washington D.C., Major General Nichols was key in developing doctrine with the Pentagon and the U.S. Congress for the use of atomic and hydrogen weapons to protect our nation and allies. Serving as Chief of the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project, Deputy Director of Guided Missiles, and other key positions, General Nichols played a major role in the development of missiles for delivery of nuclear weapons and what is today called anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defense.

Serving as General Manager of the Atomic Energy Commission 1953-1955, Nichols remained a fierce advocate of peacetime development of atomic power to meet and exceed our nation's growing energy needs. He assisted with the Atoms for Peace project and helped formulate the Atomic Energy Act of 1954.

In this twenty-fifth installment of several articles covering the post-war life and accomplishments of Kenneth D. Nichols, we learn of his efforts and concerns over transition of atomic weapons to the AEC, the closure of the MED, and his new assignments.

Congress passed the Atomic Energy Act effective August 1, 1946, that established the AEC to assume responsibility for nuclear energy from the MED. Nichols, as the Manhattan Project's liaison with the AEC, traveled to the various Manhattan Project sites around the nation with the AEC's five new commissioners (David E. Lilienthal, chairman; Sumner T. Pike; William W. Waymack; Dr. Robert F. Bacher; and Rear Admiral Lewis L. Strauss). Oak Ridge was visited early November 1946.

Prior to the AEC's visit to Oak Ridge, with Nichols' approval, tests began to determine if the K-25 plant could make sufficient U-235 (see article 13) without risking uranium production. The tests were a continuation of ongoing practices to achieve maximum U-235 production. Nichols shared the experimental issues with the Commissioners and recalled, "but like many other details of operation, it apparently made little or no impression on the individual members."

The K-25 tests were a "tremendous success" but would translate to the layoff of about 10,000 workers. Nichols drafted a letter for Maj General Leslie R. Groves' signature notifying the AEC of the intention to close the Y-12 plant (see article 12) by year-end 1946 saving taxpayers \$2M/month (\$399B/year in 2025) without risking uranium production. Lilienthal was quite upset but did not oppose the closure.

Nichols recalled, "The AEC, particularly Lilienthal, was surprised and annoyed to be confronted with this situation. He asked why they had not been informed, and I had little trouble convincing them that it had

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been included in their briefing at Oak Ridge and that they had been notified there would be no delay in making the decision; otherwise there would be a tremendous waste of government funds.

"... We [Groves & Nichols] were taking the responsibility, as well as the credit for eliminating most of the large Tennessee Eastman payroll. Lilienthal seemed to take the attitude that Groves and I had arranged this just to embarrass the AEC.

"... Perhaps the mistake I had made was in assuming the AEC would be very pleased with any action that cut the cost of producing U-235."

The terms of the 1946 Atomic Energy Act were not clearly defined and led to controversy over patents, information rights, operation of special intelligence, and civilian versus military control and custody of atomic weapons.

Nichols explained, "The military position was that all property under the custody of the MED, with the exception of Sandia and the storage bases, should be transferred immediately to the AEC. It was considered essential to our national defense that the military retain custody of all weapons stockpiles, including all components and fabricated fissionable materials.

"The Commission took a strong position against the exceptions and insisted that everything be transferred to them and that the AEC assume custody of all weapons. The Army, the Air Corps and the Navy would not agree to this. I presented their case to the best of my ability but failed to convince Lilienthal. It was up to the President to decide the issue. ...

"I considered it entirely impractical and dangerous to national security for the AEC rather than the military to have custody of weapons. ... My belief was and still is that AEC custody was not only too dangerous to national security to tolerate for even a short interval but also was an absurd concept, and I would never indicate in any way that I would accept it as a correct solution."

The AEC drafted an Executive Order on December 9, 1946, for President Harry S. Truman to sign but it was not acceptable to the military. As the "spearhead of negotiating" Nichols met twice with the Commissioners and explained multiple, practical problems with the December 9th draft and the military's concerns.

Nichols drafted his own Executive Order and presented it to the AEC on December 16th; at the end of his presentation, Commissioner Strauss commented, "I have never heard a more lucid enumeration of a man's position." But Nichols' views were not accepted. The AEC presented their final version of the Executive Order which President Truman signed December 31, 1946, just before the New Year's deadline.

Nichols closed out the MED offices by January 1947, and military personnel ceased their services to the AEC by June 1947.

With major differences of opinion concerning the AEC's responsibilities, it was no surprise that Nichols was not appointed the new position of AEC's Director of Military Application. Instead, he received approval from General Eisenhower and Secretary of War Patterson to accept appointment as Professor of Mechanics at West Point at the same time Groves requested leave and announced retirement plans.

Nichols recalled, "Lilienthal's opponents in Congress raised objections to both Groves and Nichols leaving Washington. They claimed that the two best informed about atomic matters would no longer be

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available." Consequently, Nichols then agreed to be available for part-time consultation with Congress, the military and the AEC; Groves agreed to return to Washington to become Chief of the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project (AFSWP). ("Special weapons" included atomic weapons and exploration of radioactive weapons.)

Looking forward to a long teaching career for Nichols until retirement at age 65, the Nichols family packed for their move to West Point. Again, attempting to take their first vacation after the war (see 24th article), they were interrupted when Nichols was ordered to New York to assist General Frederick Osborn, the newly appointed US representative to the United Nations' Atomic Energy Commission, with negotiations for an international agreement for control of atomic weapons.

Soon Nichols learned he was also expected to attend the joint Military Liaison Committee (MLC) meetings with the Atomic Energy Commission; be a consultant to the Army Research and Development Division, the War Department General Staff, and the Joint Strategic Survey Committee; and, when requested, meet with Senator Bourke B. Hickenlooper, Chairman of the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy, and Allen Dulles, Director of the CIA. It was clear, teaching at West Point was on the back burner for Nichols.

Nichols made numerous presentations to UN delegates on certain treaty provisions that were very successful in gaining support for international control of atomic energy. Russia, however, was not interested.

Nichols recalled, "The terms of the agreement that we were developing with the free nations were generous and equitable, and it was difficult to understand why the Soviet Union was not interested if they really desired a world at peace, as they claimed. Of course, a Communist world completely dominated by the Soviet Union would be considered by them as a world at 'peace' - - but at what a price in human spirit and freedom."

With no Soviet agreement, no advance toward international control of atomic weapons was reached.

However, Nichols did not consider his efforts a waste of time. He reflected, "Subsequent efforts by our State Department to obtain agreement with the USSR on the numbers and kinds of weapons to be produced by the Soviet Union and the United States neglect the main issue, which was and is to eliminate completely atomic weapons from the arsenals of all nations.

"Until all atomic weapons are eliminated and all nations have a better understanding of war and peace, we will continue to live under the threat of nuclear and thermonuclear war."

Tensions continued between the AEC's Chairman Lilienthal and the military over the issue of atomic weapon custody. "Lilienthal made high-level approaches to have Groves removed as Chief of the AFSWP and member of the MLC," remembered Nichols. Groves decided to retire. Nichols gladly assisted many US senators to accommodate Groves' desire for a promotion to Lt General before his retirement.

Soon, Nichols was ordered to report to General Joe Collins in Washington, D.C.; he agreed to new assignments and promotion to temporary Major General provided he could return to West Point in two years. This arrangement, confirmed by the Judge Advocate General, would avoid an act of Congress and keep the door open to teaching at West Point.

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Nichols' proposed assignments were to replace Groves as the Chief of the AFSWP (see Groves' letter to Nichols at article 22); serve as Deputy Director of Plans and Operation for Atomic Energy, General Staff, U.S. Army; serve as Senior Army representative on the MLC; and serve as Senior Army representative on the Atomic Energy Committee of Research and Development Board. He would be the youngest major general in the Army. But his promotion and assignments were held up for unknown reasons.

In summary, these events provide background to understand Nichols' role in the upcoming articles surrounding the Cold War, America's H-bomb development and the Oppenheimer hearing.

Next up: Tensions Rise (1948-1952)

Grateful acknowledgements to K. David Nichols, Jr.; D. Ray Smith; Sandy Fye; Dr. Bianka J. Adams, Alisa Whitley, Douglas J. Wilson and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Office of History; Emily (Westcott) and Don Hunnicutt; Diane Gulley; Gerald A. Potts; and Bruce W. Scollin for their assistance with this article.

Thanks for this Historically Speaking column and series goes to Barbara Rogers Scollin, grandniece of Major General Kenneth D. Nichols.



Brig General K. D. Nichols greets members of the newly appointed Atomic Energy Commission on November 4, 1946, in Oak Ridge TN. General Nichols shakes hands with David E. Lilienthal while looking on are (from left) Sumner T. Pike and Dr. Robert Bacher. Photo by Ed Westcott. (Courtesy of National Museum of Nuclear Science & History and Emily (Westcott) and Don Hunnicutt)

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President Truman Transfers Control of Atomic Energy from the Manhattan Engineer District to the Atomic Energy Commission, December 31, 1946. L>R Seated: General Manager Carroll L. Wilson, President Harry S. Truman, Chairman David E. Lillenthal. Standing: Commissioner Sumner T. Pike, Brig General Kenneth D. Nichols, Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson, Maj General Leslie R. Groves, Commissioner Lewis L. Strauss, Commissioner William W. Waymack. (Absent: Commissioner Robert F. Bacher)
(Courtesy of US Army Center of Military History)