

Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge - The Atomic Energy Commission (1953-1955)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of January 26, 2026)

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 wartime atomic energy 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 (AFSWP), 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-seventh installment of several articles covering the life and accomplishments of Kenneth D. Nichols, we learn of his retirement from the US Army and new assignment with the Atomic Energy Committee (AEC).

Before updating General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commander of SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe), in March 1952 in Paris, Maj General Kenneth D. Nichols extensively prepared for his scheduled 20-minute meeting. But Eisenhower (the Republican candidate running for the office of President of the United States), watching the New Hampshire primary elections, insisted Nichols spend the whole day with him to answer various questions on atomic weapons and guided missiles.

After the election, Departing Secretary of the Army Frank Pace, Jr. requested Nichols write his personal views (in three hours!) on the "Political and Military Implications of the Hydrogen Bomb"; the memo was read by the Secretary, the AEC and the Joint Chiefs of Staff as it provided a cohesive statement on the role of atomic weapons as a deterrence for war. Soon, Nichols would learn this deterrence statement almost mirrored President-Elect Eisenhower's views.

After his election, Eisenhower let it be known that atomic weapons were on the table, leading to an armistice truce with Korea signed on July 27, 1953. Nichols recalled, "Eisenhower had demonstrated that the threat to use atomic weapons, made by a president of the United States, with credibility and under the right circumstances, could stop a war, even though it might not gain a true peace. Apparently, the

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Chinese, the USSR, and the Korean Communists believed it. Credibility undoubtedly is a major factor making any such threat effective.”

Eisenhower was about to make additional dramatic changes impacting many lives, including Nichols'. Eisenhower appointed Rear Admiral Lewis Strauss as Chairman and Kenneth D. Nichols as General Manager of the AEC. To accept the AEC (civilian) position, Nichols was required to resign or retire from the US Army and forfeit all Army retirement pay while working for the AEC.

Nichols discussed with General Matthew B. Ridgway his preference to remain in the Army; he would not volunteer for the AEC position. Doing as told by President Eisenhower, however, Nichols submitted, “As a matter of urgency... Retirement is requested on the basis that the higher authority has determined that my services will be of more value to the United States if I accept the position of general manager of the Atomic Energy Commission than if I remain on active duty in the Army. ...” After twenty-four years' service, his military retirement as a major general, effective October 31, 1953, at age 46, was with “considerable regret.”

General Manager Nichols was warmly welcomed to the AEC by the Commissioners and Joint Congressional Committee members. Stacks of letters of congratulation from around the world were received. None were more welcome than letters from Manhattan Project associates. Here are a few of note:

- Richard Burritt (formerly of Tennessee Eastman in the Y-12 facility) wrote, “...never did I hear any official or other individual speak of Col. Nichols except with respect and often some measure of affection. This is little short of miraculous. ...When you were appointed to your present position as general manager, as a citizen, I breathed a sigh of relief.”
- Waldo E. Cohn (Chicago & Oak Ridge MetLab Biochemist; Oak Ridge Symphony's Conductor and Town Council Chairman) wrote, “Quite a few of the Project old-timers who are still in Oak Ridge were quite happy over the announcement that another old-timer --yourself-- was to become the general manager of the AEC. We felt that you, who helped get both the town and the work started, would be keenly aware of the many problems which affect this area of the AEC and of how best to deal with them.

“Our anticipation was heightened by the article in C&E [Chemical & Engineering] News last week (although the picture didn't look like the 'Col.' Nichols we knew in 1945-6!), and particularly the quotation in which you define your new job as not policy-making but the translation of policy into action. That word, 'action,' is the keynote to our feeling, for if there is one thing the AEC needs and needs badly it is action. If you can supply it and get the machinery moving, you will indeed justify our reaction to your appointment.”

Cohn then proceeded to provide “red tape” examples. Nichols responded with appreciation for Cohn's letter and said he read his comments “with a great deal of interest.”

- Norman Hilberry (Physicist and Arthur H. Compton's right-hand man at the Chicago MetLab) wrote on Thanksgiving Day, 1953, “Dear 'Col. Nick': ... When I heard the news over the phone, I let out a yell that was heard all over our building. It was a pure reflex cheer for me and for all the rest of us who have worked with you before and are still trying to plough ahead with the job. I think we all feel like railroaders whose company – due to financial reorganization – had been run by a president who was a financial genius but whose knowledge of railroading was confined to knowing how to press the pushbutton in a compartment to call the porter.

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"When, in the fullness of time, the presidency reverts to an old time railroader again there's jubilation all along the line. Even if things don't get better they can be accepted because everyone knows that the man at the top knows what it takes to get an engine out of the roundhouse, the train made up and rolling. If "silly" things have to be done they must represent a real need because the big boss knows what it takes to run a train over the road.

"Those of us who have worked with you before know that for vision of what the future can be and for knowledge and understanding of what it takes to achieve the goal and for the courage and tenacity and managerial skill required to implement the approach, no one is better qualified – I doubt if anyone is nearly as well qualified - as Kenneth D. Nichols.

"And so we welcome you back with deep satisfaction. The whole framework of operation is changed and I believe none of us expects miracles. But now we can work with a feeling that our own big boss is one of us; that he shares our hopes for the future and realizes as one of us what it takes to achieve those hopes. In short, as far as the future of the Atomic Energy program is concerned this is to me a day of real Thanksgiving."

Nichols explained, "The General Manager is responsible for getting the work done and proposing policy to the Commission and in turn to the Joint Congressional Committee [JCC]. . . . One of the reasons I went over there was that the AEC distrusted the military and the military distrusted the AEC."

Nichols' objectives, agreed to prior to accepting the position, were:

- Develop a deliverable hydrogen bomb and improve fission weapons to meet the needs of the military. He said, "We were in a race with the USSR, more of a race than many of us realized at the time."

Research and development as well as production of weapons was done by the AEC. New weapons, including the H-bomb, were developed by the Los Alamos and Livermore laboratories. The Teller-Ulam approach and the Greenhouse atomic tests at Eniwetok convinced the scientists, including Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer, that the H-bomb was feasible. In Oak Ridge in an old Y-12 building (see 12th article), the first thermonuclear device small enough to be deliverable was exploded (Operation CASTLE).

- Develop better relations with the Joint Congressional Committee. Strauss and Nichols met Congressman W. Sterling Cole, the chairman of the JCC, weekly to seek political advice on working with Congress.
- Advance the development of commercial thermonuclear atomic power and declassify information to make that possible.

This priority was personally key for Nichols agreeing to work for the AEC and would require changes to the Atomic Energy Act of 1946. Please see the upcoming 30th article.

- Halt the constant increase in the number of AEC employees and reduce bureaucracy.

Upon appointment, Nichols traveled to each field installation, including Oak Ridge, to see the status of operations and hear first-hand accounts of successes and problems occurring. A faster decision-making process was enacted with less paperwork. As personnel vacated positions existing personnel were re-assigned. In addition, Nichols coordinated efforts with the House Appropriations Committee

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Chairman to reduce personnel by 5% in the fiscal year 1955 budget. Nichols eliminated New York operations after Oak Ridge managers agreed to absorb the work thereby reducing overall personnel.

And,

- Select the type of reactor that would be most suited for demonstrating an electric atomic power plant.

Nichols reviewed eight proposals and quickly determined the Rickover-Westinghouse pressurized water reactor developed for naval aircraft carriers was the best. After approval by the AEC, the Joint Congressional and House Appropriation Committees, his negotiations with Duquesne Light, Bettis Laboratory and Westinghouse went smoothly. The review and approval took less than 24 hours, which "startled Congress" with the speed.

Soon a presidential Executive Order created another priority for Nichols.

Next up: The Oppenheimer Hearing, Part 1 (1953)

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



Atomic Energy Commission Meeting, Santa Fe Operations (SFO). L>R: (Seated) D.J. Leehey, SFO; General Manager K.D. Nichols, AEC; P. F. Foster, AEC; Brig. Gen. K.E. Fields, AEC. (Standing-all SFO) R.G. Elliot; H.B. Fry; C.C. King; P.W. Ager; R.P. Johnson; D.F. Worth, Jr.; G.P. Kraker. January 1955, Albuquerque, NM. (Courtesy National Museum of Nuclear Science & History)

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Major General Kenneth D. Nichols' Retirement Parade (Courtesy K. David Nichols, Jr.)

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Maj Gen Kenneth D. Nichols (Retired) received his second Distinguished Service Medal (First Oak Leaf Cluster) "For Exceptionally Meritorious Service in a Duty of Great Responsibility 21 Apr 1948–31 Oct 1953. In each of his various assignments, General Nichols met every requirement in a superb manner and repeatedly displayed broad professional knowledge, great tact, diplomacy, painstaking attention to detail, and unfaltering energy..." (Courtesy U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Office of History)

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General Manager K.D. Nichols and Chairman Lewis Strauss of the Atomic Energy Commission appear at a Joint Congressional Atomic Energy Committee hearing Nov 6, 1954. (Courtesy Barbara Rogers Scollin)