

# Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge: Tensions Rise (1948-1952)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of January 5, 2026)

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

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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 was also 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 the 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-sixth installment of several articles covering the life and accomplishments of Kenneth D. Nichols, we learn of his role during the tense early years of the Cold War. Complete invasion of Western Europe by the Soviets was at stake.

Major General Nichols' prescient concern with civilian control of atomic weapons by the AEC (see 25<sup>th</sup> article) unfortunately proved accurate as conflict with the USSR became a real issue. Nichols and Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) Chairman Lilienthal came to an understanding with a little help from President Truman.

Called to the White House on March 11, 1948, along with Secretary of War Kenneth Claiborne Royall, Nichols tells the story, "Truman indicated that Lilienthal and I should take seats on two chairs that were directly in front of his desk and facing him. After we sat down, as I recall it, the president said to both of us, 'I know you two hate each other's guts.'

"Then, looking me squarely in the eyes, he said, 'Nichols, if I instruct Mr. Lilienthal that the primary objective of the AEC is to develop and produce atomic weapons do you see any reason why you cannot cooperate fully with Mr. Lilienthal?' I replied: 'There is no problem if that is the primary objective.'

"Then the president turned to Lilienthal and said: 'Dave, I am signing the letter appointing Nichols a major general and he is to be chief of the AFSWP and a member of the MLC. You will have to forgo your desire to place a bottle of milk on every doorstep and get down to the business of producing atomic weapons.'

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"Then, looking at both of us, he said, 'I expect you two to cooperate.' The president then excused Secretary Royall and me and continued a conversation with Lilienthal."

The Senate Armed Services Committee approved Nichols' promotion to Major General on April 22, 1948, and he was appointed Chief of AFSWP. (He was too young to be promoted to Lieutenant General; all future Chiefs of AFSWP would hold the rank of Lt General.) Nichols was also appointed a Military Liaison Committee (MLC) member, Committee of Atomic Energy (CAE) member, and General Wedemeyer's Deputy in Plans and Operations Division (Atomic Energy).

There was no time to lose in a rapidly changing international situation that entailed preparations for possible war with the Soviets. Tensions with the Soviets escalated with Russia's:

- Overthrow of the democratically elected Czechoslovakian government in February 1948,
- Berlin Blockade June 18, 1948,
- Successful atomic bomb test in August 1949, followed by 715 more,
- The installation of the Iron Curtain, and
- Invasion of South Korea, 1950.

The first A-bomb test by the Russians was a tremendous shock to Americans and took place years before predicted by Generals Groves and Nichols, and others. Complete invasion of Western Europe by the Soviets was at stake.

Nichols personally witnessed the evolution from Truman's existing Presidential order that no one should plan for the use of atomic weapons to an acceleration of atomic weapons production, and finally, to the full support of the H-bomb development.

This evolution was directly due to General Eisenhower's influence as Nichols witnessed firsthand in meetings with and personal briefings to him. These meetings were held, sometimes daily, throughout the Berlin blockade, Berlin crisis, and Korean War (Nichols never referred to it as a "Conflict"). General Eisenhower greatly impressed Nichols with how easily he, "assumed leadership of the entire group as he entered into the discussions," recalled Nichols.

Now that Lilienthal and the AEC were ordered to produce atomic weapons, disputes arose over how many to produce. Nichols, negotiating with Lilienthal for over a month, drafted the required Presidential Order for how many weapons would be produced over the next 12 months; it was the best deal under the circumstances for a joint recommendation. But Ike insisted Nichols rewrite the Order in a half-hour. Ike said that, if necessary, he would personally call on the President to tell him why he was not in agreement with Lilienthal. The revised March 1949 letter stated there should be a greater reliance on atomic weapons, and it was necessary to expand the program. Ike also ordered Nichols to expedite the training and equipping of atomic weapon assembly teams.

After the end of World War II, "economizing" became the watchword. But with the Soviets' A-bomb explosion, Nichols said, "When he [Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson] should have awakened was when we went up to see him on the Russian atomic explosion. I remember his comment to me – he said he wouldn't believe it no matter how good the Intelligence was.

"My comment was perhaps not an appropriate one. I said, 'Well, Mr. Secretary, you'd better prepare yourself to believe this one, because it happens to be right. We'll be up in two days with full documentation that the Russians have set off an atomic explosion.'"

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Later, Nichols reflected, "You've got to look at the times – a sincere desire for peace on everybody's part, and to get along with Russia, and you shouldn't make any overt moves that looked like you were preparing for war."

The AEC increased production of fissionable materials .With Oppenheimer chairing the Long-Range-Objectives Panel under the MLC, Nichols enjoyed working with him and appreciated his "considerable support" with developing tactical use of atomic weapons .

Nichols recalled, "Oppenheimer demonstrated his leadership and was a master at summarizing the discussions and recommendations of the group. The recommendations of this panel were very helpful both to the AEC and the military. Oppenheimer gave me considerable support for developing the tactical use of atomic weapons. I enjoyed working with him."

And,

"I would like to stress that I worked with Oppie, particularly after the war, on several very key committees pertaining to the course we should be following for weapon development and expansion programs, and that type of thing . And in most cases, Oppie would be Chairman of these committees. I found that he was excellent at preparing the summaries of meetings and merging and compromising diverse opinions. And I found myself in considerable agreement with him. And I also found he supported me as the Army representative for programs the Army desired."

The stockpile of Mark III weapons increased, and Mark IV weapons were in production. Development proceeded on improved implosion weapons for both plutonium and U-235. However, studies on the thermonuclear bomb continued at a slow pace.

As early as September 1948, coordination of U.K. air bases had been discussed in a meeting attended by three armed services chiefs; the Secretaries of the Army, Navy, and Air Force; Secretary of State Marshall; Generals Gruenther and Norstad; MLC Chairman Donald Carpenter; and Nichols. Nichols recalled, "The situation with the USSR was worsening, and a greater state of readiness to deliver atomic weapons was necessary. The situation certainly was getting hotter in the Cold War."

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was signed April 1949, in part to deter Soviet expansion in Europe. In the fall of 1949, Nichols inspected all British atomic energy facilities; obtained permission to send atomic weapon assembly teams to certain British bases; and met with British leaders, notably Lord Cherwell (see 19<sup>th</sup> article), to discuss the US-UK-Canada proposed atomic energy agreement.

Nichols, assisting General Vandenburg with drafting the Joint Chiefs of Staff's position on the development of the hydrogen bomb, explained that once the Russians exploded their first atomic weapon, many scientists were now in favor of working on the project. Scientists Lawrence, Teller, and Luis Alvarez urged support for a "vigorous" H-bomb program.

Nichols recalled General Bradley, "stated that he believed the United States would be in an intolerable position if a possible enemy possessed the H-bomb and the United States did not .He said that he personally supported development of the H-bomb; Norstad and the chiefs of the Army and Navy concurred."

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Vandenburg decided in favor of development and that went on record for the Joint Chiefs' position at a Joint Congressional Committee meeting and in the JCS's recommendation to Secretary of Defense Johnson January 1950.

During this time the AEC attempted to isolate the MLC from any information regarding the H-bomb work in the national laboratories. "Without informing the MLC, Lilienthal took the report of the commission majority [against developing the H-bomb] to the President," Nichols recalled.

Nichols believed it was a grave mistake to put in a key position in national defense anyone who does not believe you should prepare for war. Meeting with Dr. Vannevar Bush to request his support in convincing President Truman of the H-bomb development, Bush laughed and said, "Nichols, when will you learn to be patient? I know that you have been fighting Mr. Lilienthal on custody, and you're now fighting him on the hydrogen bomb. You finally have him out on a limb, and he's sawing it off himself... Just be patient – the whole Commission'll be gone by June of this year [1950]." Bush was absolutely right.

President Truman announced his decision to accelerate development of the H-bomb on January 31, 1950; Nichols reflected that once Truman had the facts, he acted "vigorously". Lilienthal resigned, eliminating the "biggest obstacle to cooperation," recalled Nichols. By July 1950, hostilities in Korea began, and in November, when the Chinese invaded, "an increased state of emergency existed," the new AEC Chairman Gordon Dean wrote to the MLC.

In November 1950, Nichols was assigned to work directly with K.T. Keller (see 13<sup>th</sup> article) as Deputy Director of Guided Missiles. [During Nichols' three years of service with Keller they established production programs for Army's tactical missiles *Corporal*, *Hermes*, *Redstone* and *Honest John*; Air Force and Navy's pilotless strategic bombers *Navaho*, *Snark*, *Rascal*, *Triton* and *Rigel*; Navy and Air Force's pilotless tactical bombers *Regulus* and *Matador* and air defense missiles *Nike*, *Sparrow* and *Falcon*; and Navy's *Sidewinder* air-to-air missile.]

Nichols also served as Chief of Research and Development of the Army. Additionally, he oversaw the Nike Air Defense Project, focused on delivering atomic weapons for both offense and defense. Under Nichols, guided-missile atomic warheads were developed with Los Alamos and Sandia, and he coordinated the physical size requirement with the AEC. Nichols advocated "higher-yield weapons to make up for the inaccuracies occurring in warfare and to provide greater overpressure necessary to destroy hardened targets." Nichols also initiated research on antimissile missiles (now named antiballistic missiles or ABMs).

In December 1951, Truman approved continental atomic weapon testing. American citizens prepared for possible nuclear attacks from Soviet Russia by constructing fallout shelters and conducting air-raid drills (e.g., "duck and cover") in schools and industry.

As the possibility that the Korean War would escalate into a world war, General MacArthur suggested "the necessity to use atomic weapons" in Korea to Eisenhower early in 1952. This was the first time the terminology of military "availability" of weapons was used instead of military need for "custody," recalled Nichols.

On November 1, 1952, Los Alamos successfully exploded America's first thermonuclear device.

*Next up:* The AEC (1953-1955)

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Major General Kenneth D. Nichols, June 17, 1948, (Courtesy of Barbara Rogers Scollin)

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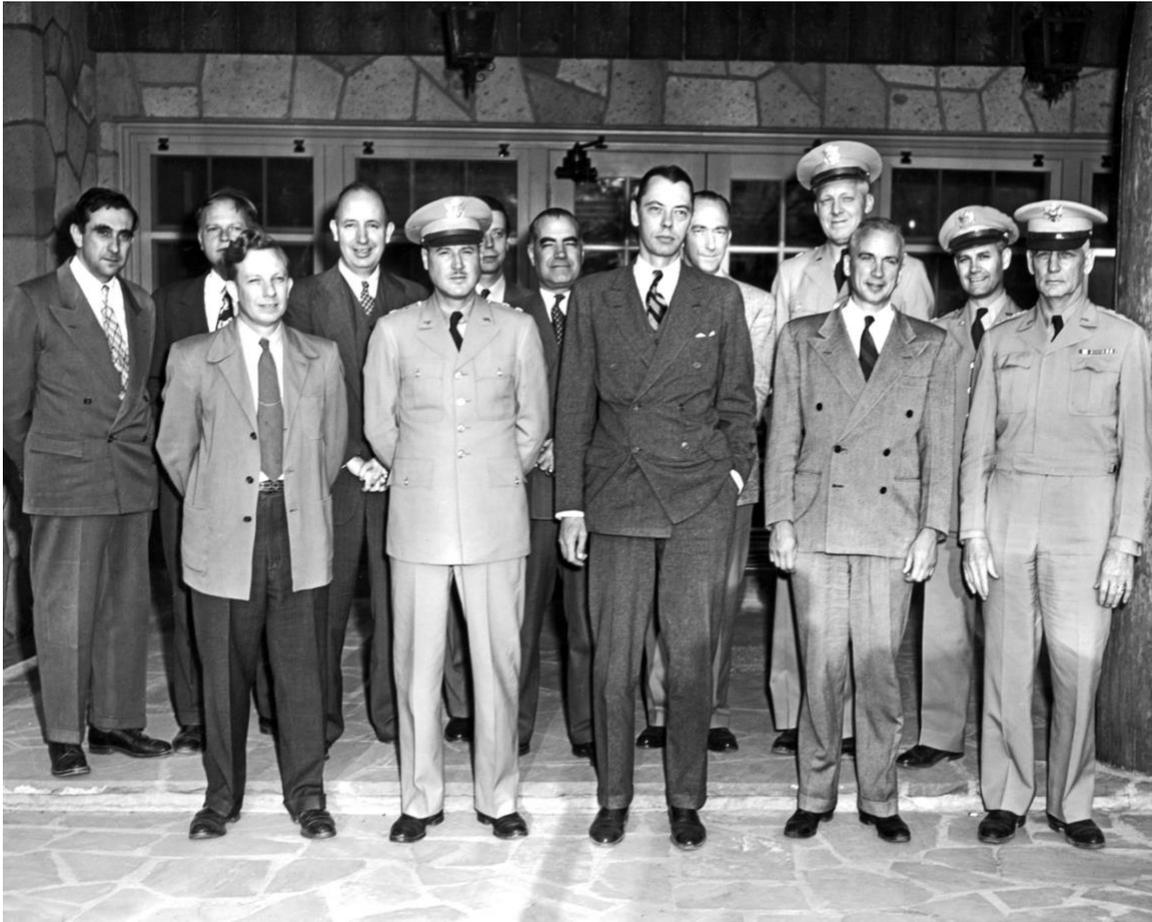
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Dr. Vannevar Bush appears before a House Committee investigating Armed Services procurement. December 5, 1952. Warren K. Leffler and Harris & Ewing. (Courtesy of Harry S. Truman Library and Museum)

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A meeting at The Lodge, Los Alamos, NM. Front row, L>R: Dr. John Manley; Maj Gen K.D. Nichols, A.S. Alexander (or possibly Mark E. Andrews?), Dr. Norris E. Bradbury, Lt. Gen. T.B. Larkin. Back row, L>R: Dr. Edward Teller, Dr. Alvin C. Graves, William Webster, Brig Gen James McCormack, Carroll L. Tyler, James Russell, Brig Gen S.R. Mickelsen, and Col. A.W. Betts. (Courtesy of Los Alamos Historical Society Archives)