Robert C. Seamans, Jr.
February 15, 1969–May 14, 1973

Portrait by Bruno Beran

ROBERT C. SEAMANS, JR., was born on October 30, 1918, in Salem, Massachusetts. After attending the Lenox School in Lenox, Massachusetts, he earned a bachelor of science degree in engineering at Harvard University in 1939, a master of science degree in aeronautics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1942, and a doctor of science degree in instrumentation from MIT in 1951. Subsequently he received honorary doctor of science degrees from Rollins College (1962), New York University (1967), Norwich Academy (1971), Notre Dame (1974), Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) (1974), University of Wyoming (1975), George Washington University (1975), Lehigh University (1976), Thomas College (1980), and Curry College (1982). In 1942 Seamans married the former Eugenia A. Merrill and they had five children.

From 1941 to 1955 Seamans held teaching and project management positions at MIT, where he worked on aeronautical problems, including instrumentation and the control of airplanes and missiles. From 1948 to 1959, he served on technical committees of the National Air and Space Administration's (NASA) predecessor organization, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics. Seamans served as a consultant to the Scientific Advisory Board of the Air Force from 1957 to 1959, as a member of the board from 1959 to 1962, and as an associate advisor from 1962 to 1967.

He joined the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) in 1955 as manager of the Airborne Systems Laboratory and chief systems engineer of the Airborne Systems Department in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1958 he became chief engineer of the Missile Electronics and Controls Division at RCA in Burlington, Massachusetts.

In 1960 Seamans joined NASA as associate administrator with responsibilities for research and development programs, field laboratories, assembling and launching facilities, and a worldwide network of tracking stations. From December 1965 until January 1968 he was deputy administrator of NASA, retaining many of the management responsibilities of his prior position. Much of the development of the space program, from completion of Project Mercury through Projects Gemini and Apollo, was approved and put into effect during his tenure.

While at NASA Seamans also worked closely with the Department of Defense (DOD) in research and engineering programs and served as cochairman of the Astronautics Coordinating

Board. Through those associations, NASA was kept aware of DOD's military developments and technical needs, and Seamans was able to advise DOD of NASA activities that were applicable to national security.

In January 1968 Seamans resigned from NASA to become a visiting professor at MIT. In July 1968 he was appointed to the Jerome Clarke Hunsaker professorship, an MIT-endowed visiting professorship in the Department of Aeronautics and Astronautics, named in honor of the founder of the Aeronautical Engineering Department. During that period at MIT, Seamans also served as a consultant to the administrator of NASA.

Having received little forewarning that he would be selected as air secretary, he sold his house in Washington, D.C., a few days prior to accepting the position. With his confirmation as secretary of the Air Force in 1969 he became a member of a burgeoning elite of government and industry—scientist-administrators.

At the beginning of his term as air secretary, Seamans saw that the Air Force needed to modernize, and at the least expense possible. He stressed the need for more efficient management controls. The Air Force had to phase in programs in such a way that excessive peak demands on the budget were avoided. Because it was impossible to predict a future threat or the technological innovations that would be required in the foreseeable future, Seamans argued that the Air Force should provide development options from which to select necessary procurement programs.

After two years in office, Seamans, who had planned to stay for only two years, informed Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird that he wished to extend his tour to complete or initiate several projects. He wanted to place the C–5 contract with Lockheed on a sound basis; resolve the F–111 cost and technical difficulties; move new programs such as the F–15, B–1, AWACS, A-X, and F–5E to the point where the Air Force could be confident in its policy of "fly before buy"; and improve military and civilian personnel policies. His willingness to stay with the Department of Defense depended on the Nixon administration's determination to terminate U.S. activities in Southeast Asia. Seamans's decision to stay on delighted Laird, who praised the Air Force secretary for his progress in modernizing forces, managing key weapons systems programs, planning for personnel requirements, and undertaking important domestic action programs. Laird also credited Seamans for his meaningful role in working toward the administration's policy of Vietnamization.

In May 1973, at the time of Seamans's resignation to become president of the National Academy of Engineering, President Richard M. Nixon said that his administration was most fortunate to have had a person of Seamans's leadership and managerial ability directing the development of sophisticated new aircraft and helping to improve U.S. missile systems. Nixon credited Seamans with keeping the Air Force modernization program costs so very close to projected estimates and for creating an environment in which people serving in the Air Force believed they could realize their potential.

Seamans served as president of the National Academy of Engineering until December 1974, when he became the first administrator of the new Energy Research and Development Administration. He returned to MIT in 1977 to become the dean of its School of Engineering in 1978. In 1981 he was elected chairman of the board of the Aerospace Corporation. From 1977 to 1984 he was the Henry Luce professor of environment and public policy at MIT, where he remained as a senior lecturer in aeronautics and astronautics. In 1996 Seamans published his autobiography, *Aiming at Targets.*