

**James Henderson Douglas, Jr.**  
May 1, 1957–December 10, 1959



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*Portrait by George A. Weymouth*



JAMES HENDERSON DOUGLAS, JR. was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on March 11, 1899. His family founded the Quaker Oats Company, and he grew up in Lake Forest, Illinois, where his father was a vice president of the company. He was an undergraduate of Princeton University in 1918 when he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Army. He did not go overseas, and after World War I he returned to Princeton, where he received a bachelor of arts degree in 1920. He then spent a year studying at Corpus Christi College of the University of Cambridge before enrolling in Harvard Law School and earning a degree in 1924. He began his career as a lawyer with the Chicago firm of Winston, Strawn & Shaw the following year but switched to investment banking in 1929 and joined Field, Glore & Company.

In 1932 President Herbert Hoover's secretary of the treasury, Ogden L. Mills, brought Douglas to Washington, D.C. Douglas served as an assistant secretary of the treasury to Mills. He remained at that post under President Theodore Roosevelt, but he grew disenchanted. When he resigned in June 1933, he organized a Citizens' Committee on Monetary Policy that publicly opposed the Roosevelt financial program. He returned to Chicago and became a partner of the law firm of Gardner, Carton & Douglas.

During World War II, Douglas served with the U.S. Army Air Forces in South America, Africa, Europe, and Asia. He rose in rank from major to colonel and became chief of staff of the Air Transport Command. In 1951 he was a member of a National Security Resources Board study group that was assigned to evaluate the adaptability of civil air transport facilities to military uses in time of war or emergency. It was Douglas's connection with the board that brought him to the attention of Secretary of the Air Force Harold Talbott. When asked by Talbott to serve as undersecretary of the Air Force, Douglas hesitated, pleading professional and personal obligations. He had planned to build up his own law firm. His oldest son convinced him to reconsider, however, reminding him that he had referred frequently to his experiences in the Air Force as some of the best in his life. When Talbott asked again, Douglas promised to work in Washington, D.C., for eighteen months. He stayed for eight years—four as undersecretary of the Air Force, two as secretary of the Air Force, and two as deputy secretary of defense.

Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson had asked Douglas to become secretary of the Air Force after Talbott resigned in August 1955, but Douglas declined because of ill health, choosing instead to continue as undersecretary of the Air Force. He recommended Donald Quarles to Secretary Wilson as a suitable replacement for Talbott. During his four years as undersecretary, Douglas attained a record of proven performance and was considered by some to be the unsung workhorse of the Office of the Secretary of the Air Force.

Douglas became air secretary in May 1957. His preference for briefings rather than detailed memoranda endeared him to many on the Air Staff. Douglas's own staff believed that those reporting to him would save themselves the time and effort of developing written reports if they kept a list of important subjects and presented them to him orally when they had the opportunity. This means of operating soon earned Douglas a reputation for a remarkable memory. He was held in great esteem by the chief of staff, Gen. Thomas D. White, who met with him daily.

As air secretary, Douglas testified frequently before Congress. One of his most important Air Force objectives was the completion of the Air Force Academy. He also was watchful of the Advanced Research Projects Agency and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, making certain that their activities did not infringe on those of the Air Force. He helped the Air Force weather serious personnel cuts demanded by Congress and the administration in early 1957 and stood ready to take advantage for the service of Sputnik's impact on congressional attitudes toward defense funding.

In addition, in 1958 he reaffirmed the 1925 court-martial guilty verdict against the crusader for air power, Brig. Gen. William (Billy) Mitchell. Douglas said it was legally correct for Mitchell to have been found guilty of violating military law for attacking his superiors because they would not accept his views on the military significance of the airplane. Douglas noted, however, that Mitchell's faith in air power had been vindicated and called attention to the posthumous Medal of Honor that Congress had voted for Mitchell in 1946.

As deputy secretary of defense from December 11, 1959, to January 24, 1961, Douglas counseled President Eisenhower on such issues as accepting responsibility for the U-2 espionage flight over the USSR and early U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal and in 1960 the Medal of Freedom for his government service.

He returned to his Chicago law practice in 1961. He served as a trustee of the University of Chicago for fifty-five years and held honorary doctorates of law from Princeton University and from Lake Forest and Grinnell Colleges. He was a past president of the Commercial Club and a director of American Airlines, March & McLennan, the Chicago Title and Trust Company, and the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company.

Douglas had four sons by his first marriage to Grace Farwell McGann, who died in 1949. He married Elinor Thompson Donaldson in 1950. He died of cancer on February 24, 1988, at his home in Lake Forest, Illinois. He was eighty-eight years of age.