Donald A. Quarles

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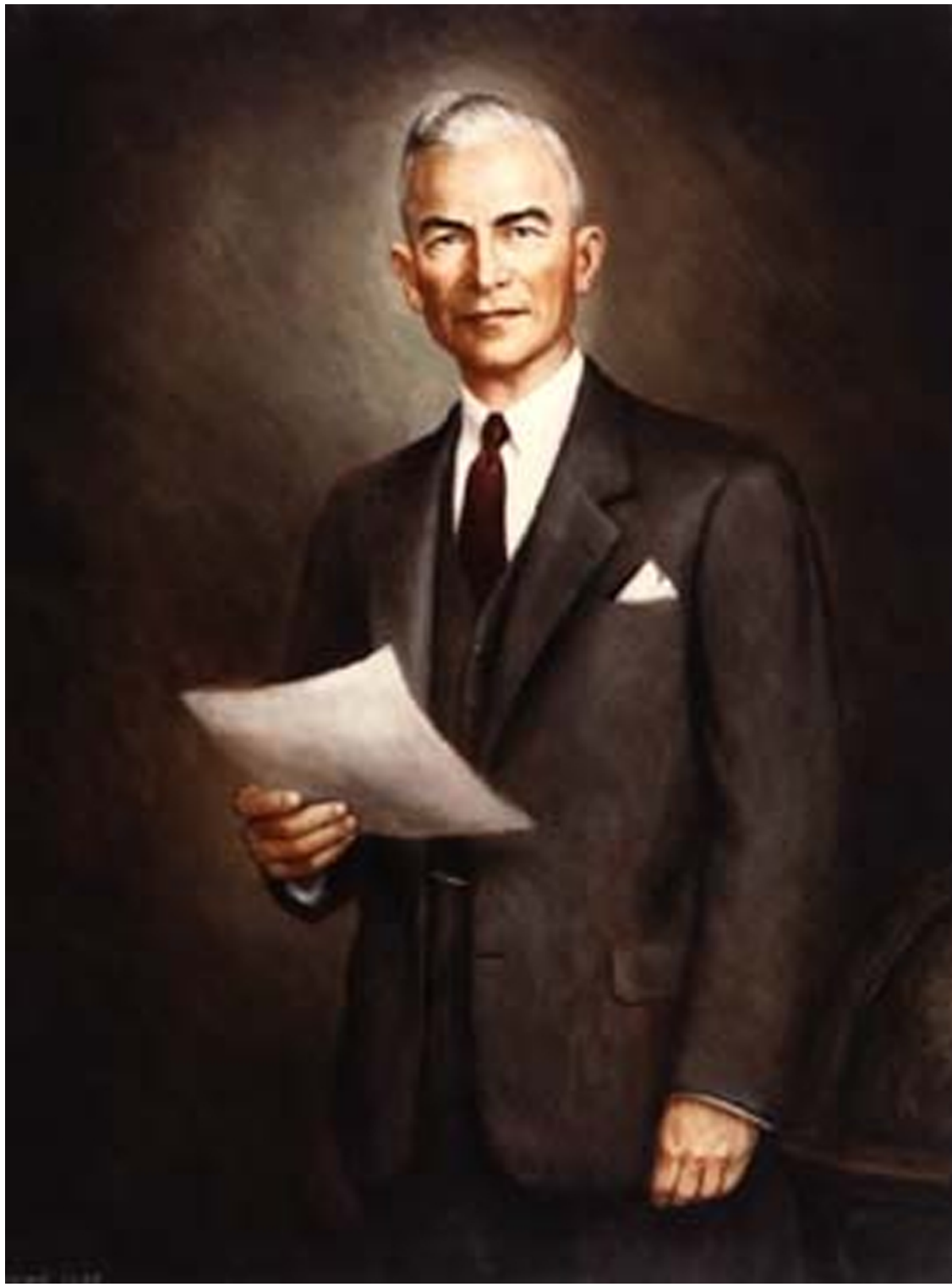

Portrait by Germain Green Glidden

DONALD A. QUARLES was born in Van Buren, Arkansas, on July 30, 1894. He graduated from high school at age fifteen, took summer courses at the University of Missouri, and taught school in Van Buren. Like his predecessor, Harold Talbott, Quarles saw service with the U.S. Army during World War I. After he earned a bachelor of arts degree in mathematics and physics from Yale University in 1916, he enlisted in the Rainbow Division and served for two years in France and Germany, attaining the rank of captain in the field artillery.

As an engineer for the Western Electric Company during the early 1920s, he studied theoretical physics at Columbia University. Quarles stayed with the inspection engineering department of Western Electric, which later became the Bell Telephone Laboratories. He was director of the transmission development department and director of apparatus development until he became the company's vice president in 1948. He also was a member and, in 1949, chairman of the Committee on Electronics of the Joint Research and Development Board of the Department of Defense (DOD).

In 1952 he was made president of Sandia Corporation, a Western Electric subsidiary that operated the Sandia Laboratory in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for the Atomic Energy Commission. In September 1953 President Dwight D. Eisenhower appointed him assistant secretary of defense for research and development, and he was subsequently selected by both the secretary of defense and the secretary of commerce to become the first chairman of the reorganized Air Navigation Development Board. In March 1954 the president appointed Quarles to the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics.

Quarles was the first Air Force secretary with a strong formal or scientific background. He was familiar with the leading scientists, and his excellent scientific knowledge was a solid foundation on which to base a great many of his own decisions. He also was the first Air Force secretary whose views on important issues diverged from those of such prominent airmen as Chief of Staff Gen. Nathan F. Twining and commander of the Strategic Air Command Gen. Curtis E. LeMay. In support of the administration's economy drive, Secretary Quarles urged that research and development funds be cut and that both the long-pursued 137-wing program and newly emphasized missile program be "stretched out." His recommendations caused him

difficulty, not only with his own military leaders, but also with a Democrat-controlled Senate subcommittee investigating U.S. air power, headed by former Secretary of the Air Force Stuart Symington.

Quarles consistently stressed the importance of the United States maintaining qualitative superiority in the face of the USSR's (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) rapid technological advances. He urged the Air Force to devote adequate attention to research and development because pilots and ground crews had to "have at their disposal the best possible equipment." In company with a strong and sustained research and development program, Quarles supported the continuous strengthening of the service and he recommended that B–52, F–102, and F–104 production proceed without delay.

Quarles devoted his attention to research and development and proved in his twenty-month tenure that a scientist could lead and manage the Air Force competently. Like the first air secretary, Stuart Symington, Quarles was the right man at the right time. The Air Force was developing missiles and supersonic bombers with increasingly complex technologies that Quarles understood. Quarles was unable, however, to confront President Eisenhower the way Symington had confronted President Harry S Truman. The legislative acts of 1949 and 1953 had changed the DOD relationships, and by 1953 the secretary of defense had a deputy and nine assistant secretaries who stood between him and the individual service secretaries. Quarles simply did not have the power that Symington had possessed. He had to support the administration against the wishes of his own airmen and, if he aspired to higher office within the DOD, he had to toe Defense Secretary Charles E. Wilson's line.

Promotion soon followed. Quarles replaced Reuben B. Robertson, Jr., as deputy secretary of defense, and remained in that position until his sudden death from a heart attack on May 8, 1959. President Eisenhower stated at the time that Quarles had devoted his extraordinary talents to the service of his country. His contribution was of inestimable value to the security of the United States and of the entire free world.

Among the many awards Quarles received during his career were honorary doctorates from the University of Arkansas in 1953 and New York University in 1955. He was awarded the USAF Exceptional Service Award in 1957 and the United States Medal of Freedom Award posthumously. Twice married, Quarles was the father of three children.