

Harold Elstner Talbott

February 4, 1953–August 13, 1955



Portrait by Gardner Cox



HAROLD ELSTNER TALBOTT was born in Dayton, Ohio, on March 31, 1888. He attended the Hill School in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, and spent two years at Yale University before returning to his father's construction company in 1911. He was vice president and general manager of the H. E. Talbott Company of Dayton, in charge of hydroelectric development and industrial construction. He remained there until 1920 and served simultaneously as vice president and general manager of the Dayton Metal Products Company (1914–20).

Talbott's interest in aviation dated from the early days of the Wright brothers. In 1915 he helped build one of the first wind tunnels for aviation experiments in Dayton. In the spring of 1916, Talbott's father, Colonel Deeds, and Charles Kettering formed the Dayton-Wright Company, a reorganization of the Orville Wright Company. The young Talbott was made president and Orville Wright became vice president and engineer. At the beginning of World War I, the Dayton-Wright Company took over the newly built Delco-Light plant. The expanded plant turned out about four hundred training planes and constructed the two-seat fighter, the DeHaviland-4, later modified to the DeHaviland-9. In October 1918 the plant, which employed twelve thousand people, produced thirty-eight planes per day and manufactured more wartime aircraft overall than any other U.S. plant.

In September 1918 Talbott was commissioned a major in the Air Service of the Signal Corps. His assignment as one of a group of officers in charge of aircraft maintenance and repair in France was canceled by the armistice.

In 1919 the Dayton-Wright Company merged with General Motors, and Talbott spent the next five years as president of the new firm and of Inland Manufacturing Company. In 1925 he moved to New York to become a director of the Chrysler Corporation, of which he was an original investor. Also in 1925 he married Margaret Thayer of Philadelphia, a union that produced four children. From 1931 to 1932 he served as chairman of the board for the North American Aviation Company, and in 1934 he became a director and chairman of the finance committee of Electric-Auto-Lite. In addition, he was a director of the Mead Paper Company for more than thirty years and a director of the Commercial National Bank of New York for more than twenty years.

Talbott had been one of the most active Republican fund-raisers in the presidential campaigns of Wendell L. Willkie in 1940, Thomas E. Dewey in 1948, and Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952. He was chairman of the Republican national finance committee in 1948 and 1949. He also had been a member of the War Production Board during 1942 and 1943.

Talbott became Secretary of the Air Force on February 4, 1953, during a period when the Korean War had jolted Congress into authorizing additional wings and their supporting infrastructure. Consequently he was able to focus his efforts on the needs of airmen and their families. Thanks to comparatively generous funding, he succeeded in obtaining more military housing than had his predecessors. Combining better housing with pay increases and other needed improvements, he raised the service personnel retention rate by linking enhanced military benefits to reenlistment.

In 1955 Talbott suffered a very serious professional disappointment when he became involved in a conflict of interest that eventually forced his resignation following a congressional investigation of his business activities. Talbott had retained his partnership in the New York investment group, Paul B. Mulligan and Company, a firm he had founded in 1948. He received more than \$132,000 from the firm and had used Air Force stationery and telephones to contact various businesses on behalf of the Mulligan interests, some of which businesses were Air Force contractors. Under pressure, Secretary Talbott relinquished his position in August 1955, maintaining that he wished to spare the President Dwight D. Eisenhower further embarrassment. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage in Palm Beach, Florida, on March 2, 1957.