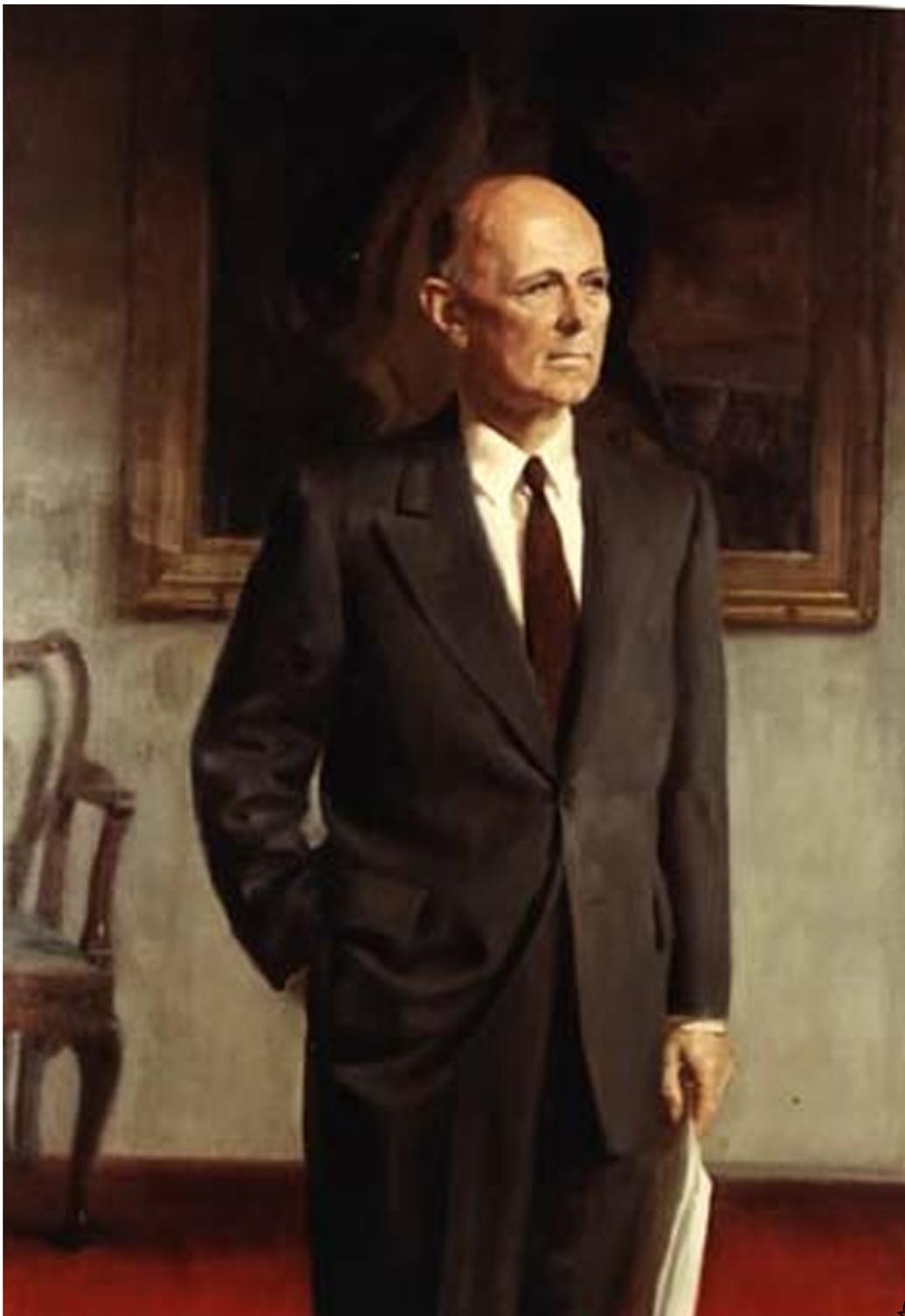


Thomas K. Finletter

April 24, 1950–January 20, 1953



Portrait by Albert K. Murray



THOMAS K. FINLETTER was born into a prominent Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, family on November 11, 1893. Educated at the Episcopal Academy in Philadelphia, he received a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1915. After two years of service as an army captain, which included a stint in France with the 312th Field Artillery, he returned to the same institution and earned a bachelor of laws degree in 1920. While in France he had met Gretchen Blaine Damrosch, the daughter of orchestra conductor Walter Damrosch and a granddaughter of James G. Blaine, who had been secretary of state under President Benjamin Harrison. They were married on July 17, 1920. They had two daughters.

Following his graduation from law school, Finletter broke with the Republican Party, angered because some of its members had scuttled the League of Nations in the United States Senate. “I had just come back from the Army,” he said, “like many others, terribly concerned with the idea of world peace, . . . and so I became a Democrat, and have been ever since.”

Finletter was admitted to the Pennsylvania Bar in 1920 and to the New York Bar the following year. As a specialist in bankruptcy law, he became a successful partner in the New York law firm of Coudert Brothers from 1926 to 1941. He also lectured at the University of Pennsylvania Law School from 1931 to 1941.

Finletter’s government career began in 1941 with a three-year assignment as a special assistant to Secretary of State Cordell Hull. His responsibilities included planning economic activities in areas liberated by the Allies during World War II, controlling foreign exchange, and overseeing the operations of the Alien Property Custodian. In May 1945 he became a consultant to the U.S. delegation to the United Nations Conference on International Organization, held in San Francisco, California. At that time he moved into the postwar international sphere with his association with the United World Federalists. His most notable public service prior to becoming air secretary occurred between 1947 and 1948 when he chaired the President Harry S Truman’s Air Policy Commission. The commission’s findings, titled *Survival in the Air Age*—but commonly called the *Finletter Report*—cautioned that an understrength Air Force would be unable to defend the United States against atomic attack. It urged that service capability be restored as soon as possible with the help of a viable aircraft industry, and it endorsed

a seventy-group Air Force of 6,869 first-line aircraft, backed by a twenty-seven-group Air National Guard and an adequately equipped thirty-four-group Air Reserve.

After the commission disbanded, Finletter headed the Economic Cooperation Administration's special mission to the United Kingdom until 1949. The mission was charged with managing Marshall Plan aid there. President Truman selected him to succeed Stuart Symington as secretary of the Air Force in April 1950, primarily because of his excellent work on the Air Policy Commission.

While Finletter concentrated on the larger issues of nuclear strategy and U.S. relations with member nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the power vacuum within the national military establishment that had existed when James Forrestal was secretary of defense began to diminish as authority became centralized within the Office of the Secretary of Defense. The individual services lost their executive branch status and were redesignated as military departments within the Department of Defense. In addition, the service secretaries lost their membership on the National Security Council, where they previously had sat as equals to the secretary of defense.

After several months in office and in consultation with the Air Staff, Finletter drew up a new set of Air Force objectives largely in response to the Korean War. In descending order of priority, these objectives were to provide the primary air defense of the United States, a strategic retaliatory force, tactical air support, and air transport operations. The long-sought-after goal of a seventy-group Air Force, espoused so intently by Stuart Symington, at last could be realized. It was Finletter's task to evaluate the needs of the Air Force and to present them before a Congress that was willing to fund them. The Korean War, which began in June 1950, forced President Truman and Congress to make significant changes in fiscal policy, from which the Air Force benefited almost immediately. Over the next years, the 48-wing force of June 1950 grew swiftly, at least on paper, in successive steps: from 68 to 95 to 120 to 137 to 143, and finally to 168 wings. The increase in planes, equipment, and personnel proved difficult for the Office of the Secretary of the Air Force and the Air Staff to manage. Adjusting budgets to fit these changing figures and, afterwards, attempting to explain them to Congress required the efforts of both organizations.

During Finletter's tenure, the Air Force Organization Act of 1951 finalized the Air Force's internal structure. Although the act did not resolve problems like those associated with supply, it did clarify the roles and responsibilities of the air secretary and the chief of staff. Finletter believed that the chief of staff should command the three major combat commands: Strategic Air Command, Tactical Air Command, and Air Defense Command. He argued that the direction of operations was a military rather than a civilian function. Under the Air Force Organization Act of 1951, the air secretary remained the nominal head of the Air Force.

Secretary Finletter consistently advocated creating an Air Force strong enough to deter the growing Soviet threat and adaptable enough to react to sudden or limited hostilities. For

reasons beyond than the Korean War, Finletter must be credited with furthering the modernization and growth of the Air Force, which by the end of his tenure was nearly three times the size it had been under Secretary Symington. Finletter accomplished that feat at a time when the Office of the Secretary of Defense was expanding its jurisdiction. By September 1953, seven new assistant secretaries of defense had been added to the civilian hierarchy, with status over the service secretaries.

When his three-year tenure as air secretary ended in 1953, Finletter returned to Coudert Brothers and stayed there until 1961, when he was appointed the U.S. ambassador to NATO, a post he held until 1965. He published several books during his lifetime, including *Principles of Corporate Reorganization* (1938), *The Law of Bankruptcy Reorganization* (1939), *Power and Policy* (1960), and *Interim Report* (1968).

In the meantime, Finletter's interest in New York politics broadened. He was a close associate of W. Averell Harriman and helped Harriman win election as governor of New York in 1954. He joined with Eleanor Roosevelt and former governor Herbert H. Lehman to found the antiorganization reform movement in the Democratic Party.

Following the death of his first wife in December 1969, Finletter married Eileen Wechsler Geist in January 1973. He died on April 24, 1980.