

Verne Orr

February 9, 1981–November 30, 1985



Portrait by Everett Raymond Kinstler



VERNE ORR was born on November 12, 1916, in Des Moines, Iowa. He grew up in the Midwest and moved to California with his family at about the time he entered high school. He graduated with a bachelor of arts degree from Pomona College in 1937 and two years later earned a master of arts degree in business administration from the Stanford University Graduate School of Business.

At the start of World War II, Orr was a trainee at Bullock's department store in Los Angeles. Called to active duty in April 1942, he entered service as an ensign in the Supply Corps of the United States Naval Reserve. During the war, he served in the United States and in the Pacific theater. He was released from active duty as a lieutenant in November 1945 and honorably discharged from the Naval Reserve as a lieutenant commander in 1951.

Orr became a partner in his father's Chrysler dealership in Pasadena, California, and remained there until 1960, when he began a two-year affiliation with a family investment business. From 1963 to 1966 he was president of Investors Savings and Loan in Pasadena. He married Joan Perk of Des Moines and they had two children.

Governor Ronald Reagan of California invited Orr to serve as the state's director of motor vehicles, a position Orr held until 1969. In that capacity, he oversaw a department with more than six thousand employees. He served briefly as the state's director of general services and in January 1970 began a five-year term as California's director of finance.

From 1975 to 1980 Orr taught government finance courses at the University of Southern California Graduate School of Public Administration. In 1977 he established a small real estate partnership with his son. He served on Reagan's presidential campaign committee and was deputy director of the office of the president-elect during the autumn 1980 transition period. He also served as comptroller for the Reagan presidential campaign and as deputy director and comptroller for the Reagan-Bush campaign.

Before becoming secretary of the Air Force, Orr was involved in many civic activities. He served as president of the Pasadena Merchants Association, the Kiwanis Club of Pasadena, the Family's Services Association of Pasadena, and the United Way of Los Angeles County; and as foreman of the Los Angeles County Grand Jury. In 1977 California governor Jerry Brown named him a regent of the University of California.

Orr anticipated that he would be offered the directorship of the Office of Management and Budget when Reagan was inaugurated, because the responsibilities of that office paralleled those that he had carried as director of finance for the state of California. In the autumn of 1980, when Orr worked as deputy director of the office of the president-elect during the transition, President Reagan called on Orr to become secretary of the Air Force. After accepting Reagan's offer, he received tremendous assistance from the outgoing secretary, Hans Mark, who even offered to move out of his office before Orr was confirmed as secretary.

The Reagan administration marked a sharp turnabout from its predecessor's approach to defense spending. "We are going after more military and civilian authorizations, higher force levels, and more airplanes and equipment. We are in an expanding mode, not a contracting mode." Orr claimed this was the lesson of the November 1980 elections. He admitted that he rode the crest of the Reagan defense spending wave and thus, much like Harold Talbott nearly three decades earlier, Orr could concentrate on issues other than weapon system procurement. He chose to focus on the quality of life for Air Force personnel. Indeed, he admitted that his major achievements as secretary were mostly people-oriented. He sincerely believed that women had more opportunities because of his initiatives; he helped to enhance the promotion opportunities of nonrated officers; and he tried to attain better living conditions for service members—better dormitories, better gymnasiums, and family service centers. Both Mrs. Orr and Mrs. Gabriel, the wife of Air Force Chief of Staff Charles A. Gabriel, were ardent advocates of family support centers on Air Force installations worldwide. Two substantial pay raises in 1981 and 1982 kept Air Force salaries even with inflation. All of those activities enhanced retention rates.

During Orr's tenure, he and his wife visited nearly 250 bases, including ones so small that they housed only a Guard or Reserve unit with a hangar and maintenance shop. For three Christmases in a row, the Orrs visited remote air bases, such as Thule and Sondrestrom in Greenland and four remote sites in Alaska and Iceland. Not adverse to public speaking, Orr gave more than seven hundred speeches and press interviews while in office, each time championing the achievements and responsibilities of the Air Force.

When he left office, Orr could point positively to an Air Force that was better equipped than it had been at any moment in the previous decade. It had the B-1B bomber, the ground-launched cruise missile, and 650 more fighter aircraft and 30 more KC-10s than it had when his tenure began. The Air Force Space Command had been initiated and ground had been broken for the Consolidated Space Operations Center in Colorado and for the Air Force Shuttle Launch Facility in California.

When he left office after nearly five years, Verne Orr had surpassed by two months Eugene M. Zuckert's record as the longest-tenured Air Force secretary. Orr would have stayed longer but left because of his wife's ill health. He returned to his private life and to his business

interests in Pasadena, California. He also continued to work on a Ph.D. in public policy and economics, attaining all but dissertation (ABD) status. In June 1999 he became dean of the School of Business and Global Studies at the University of LaVerne, in LaVerne, California, located twenty-five miles east of Los Angeles.