

W. Stuart Symington

September 18, 1947–April 24, 1950



Portrait by Alfred H. Jonniaux



W STUART SYMINGTON was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, on June 26, 1901. After serving as a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army in World War I, he went to Yale University and graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in 1923. The following year he married Evelyn Wadsworth, and they eventually had two sons. He entered the business world, engaging in various enterprises and earning a reputation for saving companies from bankruptcy and making them profitable. In 1941, after exercising those skills at the Emerson Electric Company of St. Louis, Missouri, where he had been president and chairman of the board, he was asked by the military services to go to England with a group of aeronautical engineers to study aircraft armament, with particular emphasis on the new British power gun turrets. When he returned to the United States, Symington worked to make Emerson Electric the world's largest manufacturer of airplane armament. Following the advice of his father-in-law, Senator James W. Wadsworth of New York, Symington resigned from Emerson when President Harry S Truman asked him to join the government. In July 1945 he became chairman of the Surplus Property Board and the following October, administrator of the Surplus Property Administration.

In February 1946 Truman selected Symington as assistant secretary of war for air. It was Symington's modus operandi to leave the day-to-day running of the air arm to professional airmen. He believed he could best accomplish his management goals by persuading Congress of the importance of air power, in effect promoting the operational programs devised by uniformed leaders like Gen. Carl Spaatz, who would become the first chief of staff for the soon-to-be created U.S. Air Force. As assistant secretary of war for air and later as the nation's first secretary of the Air Force, Symington showed himself unafraid to confront higher authorities to advance the cause of air power. In addition to assisting the drive for Air Force independence, perhaps his most noteworthy achievement as assistant secretary of war for air was the establishment of a cost-control system within the Army Air Forces.

The National Security Act of July 26, 1947, established the Department of the Air Force, fulfilling the dreams and aspirations cherished for many years by U.S. Army air leaders. On September 18, 1947, the Office of the Secretary of the Air Force was officially activated and Stuart Symington took the oath of office. As he had done when he was assistant secretary of

war for air, Symington continued to represent the Air Force in Congress. He had a knack for keeping in touch with almost every facet of his operation, while avoiding becoming bogged down in details. Symington had the utmost respect for his chiefs of staff, Generals Spaatz and Hoyt S. Vandenberg, and their relationships solidified during his tenure.

On several occasions, Secretary of Defense James Forrestal was so much at odds with the air secretary that he contemplated asking for Symington's resignation. Forrestal basically supported President Truman who, when referring to budget matters, called for cooperation among the services to present a "solid front" to the world on the essential elements undergirding U.S. foreign policy. And on these budgeting issues on which Forrestal wanted solidarity Symington dissented.

The air secretary's views again diverged from Forrestal's on the question of the seventy-group Air Force program, the minimum force size that airmen considered adequate for national security. Forrestal wanted and supported only a fifty-five-group program and insisted that a strong Air Force by itself "could not ensure peace or gain victory in war." But Symington believed that even a seventy-group program would provide only a means of survival against an initial enemy onslaught; it would not provide the United States with the means to win a war. He further emphasized that the seventy-group program was a peacetime program, not a war-strength Air Force. That the Air Force did not reach seventy groups during Symington's tenure was one of his greatest disappointments.

Symington's final year in office was dominated by the B-36 controversy, an issue that shook the new Air Force organization to its roots. Not only on the line were the secretary's integrity and career and the reputation of prominent Air Force generals, but the future roles and missions of the Air Force as well.

When Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson canceled the Navy's supercarrier, the USS *United States*, on April 23, 1949, the Air Force's huge long-range bomber, the B-36, became the object of Navy criticism. Detractors questioned the plane's capacity to perform its mission at the range, speed, and altitude the Air Force claimed. Attacks against the aircraft culminated on May 26, 1949, when Rep. James E. Van Zandt told Congress that he demanded answers to specific questions about the B-36, which were based on statements he had read in an anonymous document.

In January 1950 the final report of the House Investigative Committee declared the Air Force's B-36 procurement record clean and stated that there was not a "scintilla" of evidence to support the charges, reports, rumors, and innuendoes, alleging irregularities or improprieties in the procurement process. The committee wanted it made known that Symington, the leaders of the Air Force, and Secretary of Defense Johnson had survived the inquiry with "unblemished, impeccable reputations."

With the B-36 investigation completed, Symington shifted his focus to other issues and soon became disgruntled with the Air Force's lack of funding. He thought that the Air Force

budget had been cut excessively, especially after Truman's September 1949 announcement that the Soviets had detonated an atomic device. The secretary doubted that the Air Force could perform in peacetime—and certainly not in war. He found it difficult to accept increased responsibilities for the Air Force without the means to do the job. Thus, after a four-year struggle to gain respect for the Air Force and to cement its status as an independent service, Symington resigned. He was confident he had built a sound management organization in the Office of the Secretary of the Air Force and believed he had moved air power in the proper direction by “stressing modernity over tradition.”

Symington was equally certain that the Air Force had overcome many problems during his four years of leadership. It had become an equal member of the national defense team, had recovered substantially from the effects of postwar demobilization, and had made a good start toward “becoming that Air Force essential to our security in this air-atomic age.” He attributed those accomplishments to the loyal efforts of Air Force personnel, working in cooperation with the other services, government agencies, Congress, and the U.S. public.

Although he resigned as air secretary, Symington told the president that he was willing to accept another position, and so he stayed with the Truman administration as chairman of the National Security Resources Board and administrator of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. In 1952 Symington won election as a United States senator from Missouri and subsequently distinguished himself during four terms in Congress.

Stuart Symington was a leader that the Air Force needed during its infancy, and there is no doubt that his excellent leadership qualities greatly benefited the new Air Force. But he also had an inestimable advantage over any Air Force secretary who followed him—he had power. Indeed, the National Security Act of 1947 provided the air secretary as well as the other service secretaries a seat on the National Security Council, a body that included the president and the secretary of defense. Although not an official cabinet member, the air secretary had direct access to President Truman to whom the views of the Air Force could be expressed.

Symington endured the tightfisted maneuverings of an administration whose budget constraints soured any hope of securing a seventy-group Air Force during his tenure. Shortly after he left office, however, the issue became moot. When the Korean War began in June 1950, federal coffers opened again, and an austerity-minded administration and Congress pursued instead a how-much-do-you-need policy. In spite of the paucity of funds in 1947–48, Symington managed to distribute enough Air Force contracts to keep the U.S. aviation industry alive. Balancing scarce funding with building a modern force and the research and development facilities to keep it going was a creditable achievement.

After he left the Senate, Symington became vice chairman and a director of First American Bankshares, in Washington, D.C. Two years after the death of his first wife, he married Ann Hemingway Watson on June 14, 1978. He died at his home in New Canaan, Connecticut, on December 14, 1988, at age eighty-seven.