

**Thomas C. Reed**

January 2, 1976–April 5, 1977



*Portrait by Maxine McCaffrey*



**T**HOMAS C. REED was the first secretary of the Air Force to have *served* in the United States Air Force. Born in New York City on March 1, 1934, he earned a bachelor of science degree in mechanical engineering from Cornell University in 1956. As a college student he enrolled in the university's Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps program and was the highest-ranking officer, cadet colonel, during his senior year. He was designated a distinguished military graduate and received a commission as a second lieutenant in the Air Force when he graduated. Reed began active duty with the Air Force in November 1956, serving until 1959 as technical project officer for the Minuteman reentry vehicle system with the Air Force's Ballistic Missile Division. While on that assignment, he attended the University of Southern California during off-duty hours and earned a master of science degree in electrical engineering.

In 1959 Reed was assigned to the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory of the University of California, where he engaged in thermonuclear weapons physics. When he was released from Air Force active duty in May 1961, he rejoined the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory as a civilian for the 1962 reentry vehicle system test series and remained there as a consultant until 1967.

In 1962 Reed organized Supercon Ltd. in Houston, Texas, as its managing partner. The company developed and produced alloys that served as superconductors. While he maintained an interest in Supercon, Reed organized the Quaker Hill Development Corporation at San Rafael, California, in 1965 and served at various times as its treasurer, president, and chairman. Quaker Hill had agricultural, recreational, and construction projects in California and Colorado. Reed was active in Republican politics and served as a delegate to the Republican National Conventions of 1968 and 1972 and as a member of the Republican National Committee for the state of California from 1968 to 1972.

In 1973 he was asked by Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger and Deputy Secretary of Defense William P. Clements to work in various capacities in the Department of Defense. There he served as a procurement specialist and a headhunter until those two men asked him to become director of telecommunications and command and control systems in

February 1974. In November 1975 President Gerald R. Ford selected Reed to become secretary of the Air Force, and he was sworn in two months later.

Secretary Reed saw his role as one of training, maintaining, and equipping the forces that the president and the secretary of defense required. In addition, Reed believed the service secretary had to run interference on high-visibility issues that were not necessarily critical for the secretary of defense. During Reed's brief tenure he kept the F-16 foreign partnership from becoming hopelessly entangled, defended the F-15 from raids for money, kept the A-10 on track, and generally protected those programs from budget attacks. He had the persistence to keep programs alive during the austere period that followed the Vietnam War.

After leaving office in 1977, he returned to private business in California as chief executive officer of the River Oaks Agricorp in Healdsburg and to the Quaker Hill Development Corporation in San Rafael. He was a member of the Defense Science Board from 1977 to 1983 and of the Scientific Advisory Group of the U.S. Strategic Air Command from 1981 to 1983. In 1982 he returned to government for a year as a special assistant for national security affairs to President Ronald Reagan.