



Donald J. Atwood

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1924-1994

By B. Paul Blasingame

Donald J. Atwood, past councillor and treasurer of the National Academy of Engineering, died on April 24, 1994, at the age of sixty-nine. Mr. Atwood was born May 25, 1924, in Haverhill, Massachusetts. He is survived by his wife, Sue, and by two children: Susan Atwood Lavoie and Donald J. Atwood III.

Elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 1980, he served on nine of its committees, two as chairman, over the period from 1984 to 1994. In addition, his public service included the Corporation of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; the board of directors of The Charles Stark Draper Laboratory, Inc.; the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics; the Society of Automotive Engineers; the board of directors of the Michigan Opera Theatre; and the national executive board of the Boy Scouts of America.

Mr. Atwood attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), with an interruption of several years' service in Burma with the U.S. Army Signal Corps. Upon return to civilian life, Don married Sue Harian, a graduate of Tufts University, and reentered MIT to complete bachelor's and master's degrees in electrical engineering. While at MIT, he was associated with the research work pioneering the development of inertial guidance systems. He served as a research associate in MIT's Instrumentation Laboratory from 1948 to 1952. Later, with an associate, he founded the Dynatrol Corporation,

for which he served as vice-president and treasurer from 1952 to 1959. (In May 1988 Mr. Atwood received an honorary doctor of engineering degree from Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology).

In 1959 Mr. Atwood joined the AC Spark Plug Division of General Motors Corporation (GM) as a laboratory director and became director of engineering of that division's Milwaukee operations a few years later. The work in Milwaukee centered around inertial guidance and navigation for large missiles, the Apollo spacecraft, and commercial aircraft for airlines worldwide.

During the next two decades, Mr. Atwood progressed through a series of increasingly responsible assignments as GM chose him to manage its rapidly advancing technology-based business. In 1970, when the Detroit Diesel Engine and Allison Divisions were consolidated into the Detroit Diesel Allison Division, Mr. Atwood was named manager of the Indianapolis operations. In 1974 he became the first general manager of GM's new Transportation Systems Division and later that year was named general manager of the Delco Electronics Division. In 1978 Mr. Atwood was named vice-president of the corporation and general manager of the Detroit Diesel Allison Division. Three years later he was named vice-president and group executive in charge of the Electrical Components Group, and in 1981, he was assigned responsibility for the worldwide Truck and Bus Group. In 1984 he was named president of the GM Hughes Electronics Corporation, a subsidiary consisting of Delco Electronics as well as Hughes. Also in 1984 he was named executive vice-president of the corporation, and in 1987, was elevated to the position of vice-chairman of the board. Mr. Atwood's rapid progress through General Motors Corporation reflected his key leadership of three major changes in General Motors. First was his role in applying electronics to modernization improvements in automobiles and trucks. Second was his critical role in the acquisition of Hughes Aircraft Company, Inc., and third was a similar role in the acquisition of Electronic Data Systems.

In the first of these, the entire automotive industry was faced with making a giant step forward to bring emissions under control and at the same time improve fuel consumption,

performance, and safety. This meant attacking the problem on a total systems basis in a situation in which fuel control devices were under development in one division, electronics to sense the system's needs and issue command signals were under development in another division and, the automobile was designed and built in any one of five other divisions. Mr. Atwood, with his extensive background in electronics, sensors, and dynamic systems, provided a key role overseeing individual component development and simultaneously tying all together in the automobile and demonstrating total performance of the whole.

His corporate roles required the human side of leadership, which Mr. Atwood had in great measure. For example, convincing three different business organizations—General Motors, Hughes Aircraft, and Electronic Data Systems—of their mutual needs and finding working protocols under which each could be productive was a gigantic assignment. Yet Mr. Atwood's practical business experience, his credibility, and his very human approach to such matters were probably the singular factor in making the synergy of these organizations realizable and successful.

As Mr. Atwood approached GM's retirement age, the new administration in Washington was searching for people of talent and dedication. President George Bush called Mr. Atwood asking him to become deputy secretary of defense. It was a time of soul searching when normal mortals seek a "few days off," but Don set aside his own comfort and with the support of his wife, Sue, signed on.

The next four years were more demanding than could have been imagined. Fortunately, Don Atwood and Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney made the perfect team. Of necessity, Mr. Cheney was swept up in a fast-developing sequence of international events from the coup to oust President Gorbachev to Desert Storm. Mr. Atwood, meanwhile, had to manage the defense establishment while at the same time overseeing domestic field operations. It was his task to send federal troops to stop loss of lives and rioting during a chain of hurricanes from the Virgin Islands to Florida to Guam and then to protect lives and property during the Los Angeles riots.

Washingtonians were delighted by the Atwoods. Don went about the defense management business with his typical down-to-earth Yankee wisdom. He proved to be a superb statesman and diplomat as he met with foreign diplomats as well as congressional and corporate leaders throughout the world. Frequently Don and Sue were called upon to travel to foreign locations where Don would deliver a sensitive message or resolve a potential problem. Using his quiet, credible diplomacy, he handled each situation without crisis. Don was frequently sought after to give major speeches around the globe because of his wealth of knowledge, clear perspective on events, and outstanding communication skills. It is rare that an appointed executive wins the overwhelming respect of the Washington bureaucracy, but Don did.

From laboratory engineer to business manager to government executive, Don Atwood was a leader with genuine humility, not one out to take credit or seek accolades, but in fact, a very natural person who took time to work with people out of concern for their well-being.

