



Jerome Wiesner

Jerome Bert Wiesner

1915-1994

By Paul E. Gray

In or out of public positions, he never stopped caring or working for the country's good. He never thought it was not his problem . . . [He] performed the office of public citizen better than any contemporary I know. . .

Anthony Lewis *The New York Times* October 28, 1994

Jerome B. Wiesner—engineer, educator, adviser to presidents and the young, passionate advocate for peace, and public citizen—died on October 21, 1994, at his home in Watertown, Massachusetts, at the age of seventy-nine. Throughout his life, he applied his intellect and wisdom and energy to improve the many institutions with which he was involved, to ameliorate the problems clouding the future of humankind, and to make the world a better, safer, more humane home to all its citizens.

Jerry was born in Detroit, Michigan, on May 30, 1915—the son of a shopkeeper—and grew up in nearby Dearborn, where he attended the public schools. He attended the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where he earned bachelor of science degrees in electrical engineering and mathematics in 1937, the master of science degree in electrical engineering in 1938, and the doctor of philosophy degree in electrical engineering in 1950.

He began his professional career in 1937 as associate director of the University of Michigan broadcasting service, and in 1940 moved to the Acoustical Record Library of the Library of Congress, where he served as chief engineer. In that capacity he traveled throughout the South with folklorist Alan Lomax recording the music of the black folk and blues tradition.

In 1942 he joined the Radiation Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), beginning an association that with brief interruptions for government service, lasted until his death fifty-two years later. At the Radiation Laboratory, he played a major role in developing microwave radar—a tool that Winston Churchill characterized as decisive in the Allied victory in World War II.

In 1945 he moved for a year to Los Alamos to work on instrumentation for nuclear weapons tests in the Pacific.

In 1946 he rejoined MIT as assistant professor of electrical engineering, working in the Research Laboratory of Electronics (RLE), a multidisciplinary center for basic research in electronics, physics, and communications, which grew out of the wartime Radiation Laboratory. He made significant contributions to the continued development of airborne radar systems and to the development of tropospheric-scatter microwave communications systems, which provided highly reliable long-distance communications.

Promoted to full professor in 1950, he became director of RLE in 1952 and head of the Department of Electrical Engineering in 1959.

In 1961 Jerry took leave from MIT to serve as special assistant for science and technology to President John F. Kennedy and as chairman of the President's Science Advisory Committee (PSAC). He also held these posts for a short time under President Lyndon B. Johnson, following President Kennedy's assassination in 1963. He had known government consulting and advisory service in prior years as a member of PSAC since 1957 and as a participant in several panels. He participated in the Pugwash Group, which enabled him to develop strong personal relationships with Soviet scientists and leaders.

He was remarkably gifted in his ability to elucidate complex issues and to explain the effects of policies and their technical and political consequences, as in his 1961 book *Where Science and Politics Meet*. He wrote extensively on the issues of arms control and nuclear disarmament. He understood the deadly collateral hazards associated with nuclear weapons production and testing, and an unrestrained nuclear arms race. With persistent persuasive argument he convinced others, in the East and West, that the world must move off this dangerous course. His influence was central in bringing about the ban on atmospheric weapons testing and in generating interest, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, in parallel systematic reductions in nuclear weapons.

Jerry Wiesner's passionate involvement with these issues was evident throughout his life. His 1969 publication (with Abram Chayes) of *ABM: An Evaluation of the Decision to Deploy an Antiballistic Missile System* earned him a place on President Nixon's "enemies lists." In 1993 he published, with his MIT colleagues Kosta Tsipis and Philip Morrison, *Beyond the Looking Glass: The United States Military in 2000 and Later*, calling for deep cuts in American military procurement and expenditures. And in the days before his death he was corresponding with Secretary of Defense William Perry about Pentagon needs and budgets.

When Jerry returned to MIT after his service in the White House, he became dean of science, having been appointed institute professor in 1962, MIT's highest faculty rank. In 1966 he became provost, and was elected thirteenth president of MIT in 1971, serving in that position until 1980. As dean, provost, and president, he expanded MIT's teaching and research programs in health sciences, humanities, and the arts. He sought new ways in which MIT's expertise in science and engineering could be brought to bear on social issues such as health care, urban decay, mass transportation, and housing. He was instrumental in establishing the MIT program in Science, Technology, and Society to focus on ways in which science and technological and social factors interact to shape modern life. Jerry was centrally involved in the creation of the Program in Media Arts and Sciences and the Media Laboratory, which are housed at MIT in the Jerome and Laya Wiesner

Building. He was deeply committed to the goals of this nation's civil rights movement, and the period of his leadership of MIT produced the greatest progress in bringing women and minorities to the student body and the faculty.

After his retirement as president, Jerry devoted himself to teaching and research in technical and policy areas related to science, technology, society, and world peace.

Jerome Wiesner was elected to the National Academy of Engineering (NAE) in 1966 and to the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) in 1960. He was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1953) and of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (1952). In 1985 he was awarded the NAE's Arthur M. Bueche Award for long-term contributions to public understanding of the risks of the nuclear age, and in 1992 he received the National Science Foundation's Vannevar Bush Award for outstanding contributions in science and technology that are significant to the national welfare. In 1993 he received the National Academy of Sciences Public Welfare Medal, the highest honor of the NAS, for distinguished contributions in the application of science to the public welfare.

Jerry received honors throughout his life from professional, academic, and philanthropic organizations in the United States, from distinguished international associations, and from foreign governments. He was the recipient of honorary degrees from premier universities—Harvard, Tufts, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and Notre Dame among many others. This extraordinary stream of honors, although warmly appreciated by the recipient, never altered his fundamental modesty; the distinguished elder statesman of the 1990s was, in fact, not very different from the junior engineer who arrived at MIT fifty years earlier: still a little shy, but friendly, humorous, and always accessible.

Jerry Wiesner was a reliable friend, and all at MIT and elsewhere (including this writer) who relied on that friendship and on his counsel and guidance, are unlikely to find its replacement.

For Jerry's inauguration as president of MIT on October 7, 1971, Archibald MacLeish wrote and delivered a poem that spoke the truth of this remarkable man. It ended with these lines, which are the best words to conclude this remembrance:

Advisor to Presidents the papers call him.
Advisor, I say to the young.
It's the young who need competent friends,
bold companions,
honest men who won't run out,
won't write off mankind, sell up the country,
quit the venture, jibe the ship.
I love this man.
I rinse my mouth with his praise in a
frightful time.
The taste in the cup is of mint,
of spring water.

