



J. Herbert Hollomon

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1919–1985

By Donald N. Frey

J. Herbert Hollomon died on May 8, 1985, in Albany, New York, after a varied and distinguished career in industry, government, and academia. Born in Norfolk, Virginia, he was educated in physics and in metallurgy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), from which he received his D.Sc. in metallurgy in 1946.

Following wartime service as a major in the United States Army at the Watertown Arsenal, Hollomon joined the research laboratories of the General Electric Company (GE) in Schenectady, New York, where he rose over a sixteen-year career to be the general manager of the General Engineering Laboratory.

Hollomon made a speech in early 1960 that called for a national academy of engineers. His speech, reprinted in *Science*, came to the attention of Harold Work, director of the Engineering Foundation. Working with other distinguished engineers, their labors paid off with the establishment in 1964 of the National Academy of Engineering of which Hollomon was a founding member.

Responding to the call of President John F. Kennedy, he was appointed in 1962 the first assistant secretary for science and technology at the Department of Commerce (DOC), from which position he oversaw all of the department's scientific and technical undertakings, including the National Bureau of Standards, the Patent and Trademark Office, and the Weather

Bureau. He established the Environmental Sciences Services Administration (later, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), the Commerce Technical Advisory Board, and the State Technical Services program. While in this position, he was among the first to recognize the importance of national policies directed at improving the technological performance of civilian industries, and became famous, if not infamous, for his efforts at establishing the ill-fated Civilian Industrial Technology Program. He was also instrumental in legislative proposals that led to the passage of the National Highway Transportation Safety Act, one of the earliest modern laws addressing consumer safety. He served for part of 1967 as acting under secretary of commerce, but left DOC for the University of Oklahoma in the fall of 1967, in part over differences with President Lyndon B. Johnson on the U.S. role in the Vietnam War.

Hollomon served the University of Oklahoma for three exciting years: one as president-designate and two as president. While there he received national attention for implementing an innovative, change-oriented planning process for the university that involved hundreds of students, alumni, faculty, administrators, and citizens of the state in charting the future of the university. The turbulence surrounding this process, combined with sharp disagreements with the then-governor of the state over many issues, including his responsiveness to student demands in that period of national campus unrest, led to his resignation in 1970.

Hollomon then returned to his alma mater, MIT, serving as consultant to the president and the provost and then as Japan Steel Industry Professor of Engineering and founding director of the Center for Policy Alternatives. From this base he and his colleagues among the students, faculty, and staff contributed to the formation of national technology strategies in countries as diverse as Brazil, Korea, Israel, Sweden, and the United States, as well as to influential reexaminations of the premises of governmental efforts to encourage research and development and to manage the environmental and safety consequences of new technology. In addition to his contributions to research and policy analysis, he played a central role in establishment of graduate programs at MIT in technology and policy and in the

management of technology, both areas in which he was an acknowledged innovator.

In 1983 he and several other center staff and their activities moved to the campus of Boston University, where he remained until his death.

Hollomon tore through life, leaving in his wake myriad expanded minds, changed lives, and reformed institutions. Combative, controversial, often ahead of his time, and always pushing those around him to do more and do better, he was a colorful and complex man. He touched all those around him in an intense and personal way.

I knew and treasured knowing J. Herbert Hollomon for nearly forty years after he received his D.Sc. in metallurgy and I received mine in 1949 from Michigan. In those days not many doctorates were granted in metallurgy in the United States, and we all knew each other.

I first called on Herb when he was at GE. We had an exhilarating conversation on dislocations and everything else. I then actively followed, and in some instances participated in, his career until his death. From the first meeting to the last, our association was one of great content, humor, and plain fun. I greatly admired Herb, could get mad at him at times, but was always turned on by him. He could be provocative in the extreme, could take outrageous positions to see what would happen, but always made you think—and he was very often right in his views.

My most intense association with Herb was during the periods from 1979 to 1982 and in 1984 and 1985 when he served as a director of Bell & Howell (for which I was chief executive). (The gap in service occurred when he was recovering from his stroke.) Herb performed exactly as I hoped he would. As is common with any large public company, the directors were a diverse lot with backgrounds in such fields as finance, operations, or law. Herb was, as always, the provocative technologist. He constantly stirred up the directors and on more than one occasion was strongly and noisily supportive of my efforts to introduce more innovations into the company and take the risks thereby. We had no choice, but some directors are never comfortable with ambiguity. Herb

was. He also knew the greater risks of doing nothing. At one time he was even instrumental in saving my job during the dark days of Bell & Howell.

Bell & Howell eventually converted itself from a sleepy, obsolescent company to one based on cutting-edge, newer technologies, and became very successful. Herb can take a lot of credit for this. He was there when needed. It is worth noting further that Herb always took his director fees in Bell & Howell stock. He put his money where his beliefs were. When the company was acquired in a leveraged buy out in 1988, at a fancy price (and coincidentally as I retired), and Herb had tragically departed us, the stock left his wife Nancy well off. It was a typical Herb payoff!

As a special note, Herb and I had a lot of fun redesigning everyday objects that partially paralyzed stroke victims, as he then was, could use. He and I, in his dark days, would work out the designs, and I would get them made for him. It was a small special form of thanks for knowing him. I wanted to be there when he needed me.

I miss Herb, ever the provocateur over the right issues in all his various walks of life. I wish his spirit well, for he lives on in my life.

