Alden P. Yates

1928-1989

By William W. Moore

Alden P. Yates, vice-chairman of the Bechtel Group, Inc. and chairman of its executive committee, died on April 12, 1989, at the age of sixty at the Pacific Presbyterian Medical Center in San Francisco after a valiant struggle against cancer. Alden's life and career were closely tied to the Bechtel organization and to the engineering and construction industry. His father, Perry Yates, was a veteran of the Hoover Dam project and was also an important member of the Bechtel executive team. Alden spent his early years in the construction environment of the Hoover Dam project where his father was a construction engineer. Alden became excited at an early age about "the wonderful tools we have to help bring positive change to the world." His father later became executive vice-president of Bechtel, and as his career progressed the family traveled to various construction projects. Alden early had a summer job as a "junior expeditor," which he described as "riding a bike around the warehouse and grabbing parts." This experience with engineering and construction life provided "the perfect construction business baptism."

Alden earned his B.S. in civil engineering from Stanford in 1951 and was a member of Beta Theta Pi. Also while at Stanford, he met and married his wife, Dawn, and made many lifelong friends.
After serving as a lieutenant "JG" in the U.S. Coast Guard, Alden Yates began his thirty-five-year career with Bechtel in 1953. His first assignment was a field engineer at Pacific Gas & Electric's Morro Bay steam power plant in California. From that start he served in a broad variety of projects in the power, civil, and mining fields throughout the world, steadily working his way up through the company. In 1970 he was elected a vice-president and thus became a partner in the privately held Bechtel organization.

His responsibilities in the organization continued to increase through the 1970s. In 1976 he became manager of a Petroleum and Chemical Division based in Kuwait, and joined the board of directors of Bechtel the following year. When based in London in 1980, he was in charge of three Bechtel divisions and was elected to the company's executive committee.

In November 1980 Alden Yates was elected president of Houston-based Bechtel Petroleum, Inc. and was elected in May 1983 to president and chief operating officer of its parent company, Bechtel Group Inc., replacing George P. Shultz. Mr. Yates and Mr. Shultz were the only two non-Bechtel family members to hold the presidency of the parent company.


Steve Bechtel, Jr. noted "we have lost a valued leader and a special friend. Alden has personified this company's idea of excellence, dedication, and teamwork. His contributions to the Bechtel organization and to the engineering profession were significant and lasting." He also undertook personal efforts to "feel the pulse of the organization and hear what's on people's minds." When he heard too often that people felt unappreciated, he wrote in Bechtel's management notes that "in the pressure of these difficult times, most of us can forget to tell others that they have done a good job and are appreciated for their work. We should not take anyone for granted." He also noted that "a bright and prosperous course lies in our future-if we choose to seek
Outside of his career with Bechtel, Alden Yates was a major contributor to the engineering profession and to the communities where he lived and worked. The interests and welfare of the people working under his direction were always an important factor in his decisions and actions. Alden told the graduating seniors at Menlo College, Palo Alto, that they should travel and "get out and see for yourselves who shares this planet with you, how they live, why they think as they do. We are increasingly dependent on each other throughout the world and the sooner we all realize that fact the better we can solve the social, political, and economic problems that surround us."

Alden Yates was elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 1986. He was also a member of the Conference Board, the advisory council of Stanford University School of Engineering; the California Business Roundtable; and the American Society of Civil Engineers. He was a director of SRI International; United Way of the Bay Area; the National Council for Minorities in Engineering, Inc.; The San Francisco Opera Association; and the Bay Area Council. He was a trustee of the Pacific Presbyterian Medical Center and served as chairman of the San Francisco Bay Area Science Advisory Board.

Alden enjoyed spending weekends with his family at their ranch in Napa Valley of California where he played tennis and took an active interest in wine making, fly fishing, and golf.

He is survived by his wife of thirty-eight years, Dawn; their six children, Steven, Michael, Jeffrey, Russell, Karen Weiss, and Patricia Mitchell, all of California; and six grandchildren.

A memorial service for Alden was held April 18, 1989, at the Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.