



John D. Harper

John Dickson Harper

1910–1985

By Allen S. Russell

John Dickson Harper, former chairman of the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa), noted industrialist, and civic leader, died on July 26, 1985, in Pittsburgh's St. Clair Memorial Hospital of a heart ailment. He was seventy-five years old.

Mr. Harper was born in Louisville, Tennessee, on April 6, 1910. When he was fifteen years old and still in high school, he obtained a summer job running an electric truck for twelve dollars a week at Alcoa's nearby operations, where he continued to work during school vacations until he received his high school diploma. After graduation, he became a cooperative student at the University of Tennessee and alternated his schedule between classes and his job in the Alcoa plant. He also found time to be a member of the ROTC, the Pershing Rifles, and Tau Beta Pi.

In 1933, following his graduation from the university with a degree in electrical engineering, Mr. Harper went to work operating a complex powerhouse switchboard in one of Alcoa's hydroelectric plants. Two years later, he was assisting in the actual design and construction of a new generating station.

In 1943 John became assistant power manager of Alcoa's extensive Tennessee and North Carolina generating facilities. During the next eight years, he organized central load

dispatching, standardized operating procedures, coordinated plant operations with the Tennessee Valley Authority, directed the development of telemetering equipment, and patented several sophisticated telemetry devices. In addition, he developed maintenance procedures for equipment and oils and administered power contracts for the facilities.

After Alcoa decided in 1951 to build a hundred-million-dollar aluminum smelter at Rockdale, Texas, Mr. Harper was given the responsibility of building and operating it. He soon found, however, that the actual building of the smelter was only one of his many construction problems. In addition to erecting a huge reduction plant in an industrially undeveloped area of Texas, Alcoa had decided to generate its power by strip-mining and burning lignite, a subbituminous coal that abounded in the area. This decision meant that while his engineers handled site preparations (getting the land ready for foundations and scooping out an 850-acre lake to store water for the smelter), Mr. Harper had to prepare area residents for a major upheaval in their landscape and their lives.

This part of the story was reported in the *Saturday Evening Post* 1955 article, "How to Get Along with Texans," by George Sessions Perry. According to Perry, Mr. Harper, wearing khakis and driving an inexpensive car, set out to win friends for Alcoa. He became acquainted with the area's ranchers, farmers, businessmen, and politicians; helped the small town of Rockdale expand to accommodate thousands of construction workers and, later, production employees; purchased property and minerals; negotiated water rights-of-way with landowners along a twelve-mile pipeline to the San Gabriel and Little rivers; and generally dispelled fears that Pittsburgh Yankees were out to ruin Texas for a profit. Later, reported Perry, when plant operations required the construction of a lake, he did not surround it with a nine-foot fence to keep the public out, but instead stocked it with bass and invited the community to enjoy it as their own.

Mr. Harper pledged to Rockdale's town council that Alcoa

would pay taxes in advance so that the town could expand such essential municipal facilities as water lines and streets. New schools also had to be built for the children who would come with the anticipated employment flood. When he learned that the weekly *Rockdale Reporter* had been campaigning for years for a municipal swimming pool, Mr. Harper arranged for Alcoa to donate the land and pay half the cost of a first-class pool installation.

Scarcely a year after ground was broken, the first potline at the Rockdale Works was producing aluminum. By early 1954 the entire smelter was in operation at a capacity of 90,000 tons a year—a figure that later expansion increased to more than 300,000 tons a year, making Rockdale Alcoa's largest smelter.

On April 24, 1954, more than seven hundred special guests, including Governor Shivers and Alcoa executives, visited the smelter for lunch and a tour that preceded an open house. The next day John Harper learned what it meant to invite all of Texas to a public inspection. He and his staff had expected ten thousand visitors at most. By nightfall, however, more than twenty thousand central Texans had poured through the plant, leaving an exhausted Alcoa staff.

In 1955 Alcoa's management decided that John Harper had fulfilled his Rockdale mission and transferred him to Pittsburgh. He was made Smelting Division general manager in 1956 and was appointed vice-president in charge of the Alcoa Smelting and Fabricating divisions in 1960. In 1962 he became, in succession, vice-president in charge of production, executive vice-president, and a director. He became president of Alcoa in 1963 and chairman of the board in 1970. He held the position of chief executive officer from 1965 until March 1, 1975. On June 19, 1975, he retired as chairman, but continued as a director. He was chairman of the executive committee from 1965 until 1978.

Ranked high among his accomplishments was the development of the Alcoa smelting process, a revolutionary, power-saving method of producing aluminum. Mr. Harper

supported this project from its long, expensive development stage through its full-scale piloting at Palestine, Texas. Application of the smelting process was eventually postponed by excess capacity in the aluminum industry.

During his busy years with Alcoa, John Harper rose at 6:30 or earlier every morning, including Sundays and holidays; his tremendous drive kept him going until late at night. It was commonplace for him to work several hours in his Pittsburgh office, fly to New York in a company plane for a business luncheon or another engagement, and return to Pittsburgh by late afternoon. Typically, by dawn the next day, he could be off to Washington, an Alcoa installation on either coast, or an overseas business conference.

John Harper's leadership style in Alcoa was modeled on a practical plane. He delegated authority; expected, and got, results. He might ask advice from a dozen associates on major problems, but when it was time to act, he made the decision.

Following his retirement from Alcoa, Mr. Harper accepted the position of director and chairman of the Communications Satellite Corporation (COMSAT) and director of AEA Investors, Inc., Crutcher Resources Corporation, and Banque Paribas. The year before he passed away, he became chairman of AEA Investors, Inc.

Of all his convictions, none was more positive than his belief that no business could survive without adequate profits regardless of how prosperous it or its country might appear to be. He expressed his feelings on this point to the Dallas Management Association:

Whatever the reasons may be, it is evident that increasing numbers of Americans seem to want the benefits of the free enterprise economic system without first putting forth the effort to earn the profits that make possible an even higher standard of living.

If we are to have a public policy of prosperity without profits, this means that we must embrace a new economic and political philosophy—one in which state control and dictatorial power replace our free choice in the marketplace—and I firmly believe that this is not what Americans, including those in labor and management, really want.

The dangerous illusion of profitless prosperity feeds on ignorance, indifference, and procrastination....

He called business to a broader fulfillment of its social responsibility and to deeper involvement with the society at large. To the Congress of American Industry sponsored by the National Association of Manufacturers, he said:

A viable society in which business can prosper and grow, the kind of society all of us want, demands the intelligent exercise of public responsibility by the business community itself....

It makes sense to participate—with corporate money, talent, and energy—in a community project to improve conditions in the slums. In the long run, such participation will prove to be beneficial to your own business. Because, if you reduce delinquency, crime, and illiteracy, you reduce your own corporate tax load, and you convert welfare cases into productive workers.

In delivering the three 1976 Fairless Lectures, "A View of the Corporate Role in Society," at Carnegie Mellon University, he said: "I have offered as my central thesis the conviction that it is the responsibility of the corporation to deserve and keep society's trust, and that it does so by being a positive agent of change."

He also said in these lectures, "I have tried to practice the principles of management responsibility which I preach. I have devoted myself to bringing others together to work together for the common good."

John Harper was a founder and the first chairman of the Business Roundtable, chairman of the National Alliance of Businessmen, vice-chairman of the Committee for Economic Development, honorary member of the Business Council, and a senior member of the Conference Board. He was a founder and chairman of the International Primary Aluminum Institute and president of the Aluminum Association.

In addition, he was a director of the Mellon National Corporation, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, and the Procter & Gamble Company. He was vice-chairman of the Committee

for Constructive Consumerism, vice-chairman and a life trustee of Carnegie Mellon University, and a member of both the national executive committee of the Boy Scouts of America and the Business Committee for Arts, Inc.

Among numerous honors bestowed on Mr. Harper during his career was the Knight's Cross, Order of St. Olav, for distinguished contributions to Norwegian industry. He also held the Silver Beaver Award of the Boy Scouts of America, the American Business Press Silver Quill Award, and the Pennsylvania Society's Gold Medal for Distinguished Service. He received the 1977 Gantt Memorial Medal of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers and the first Bryce Harlow Foundation Award in 1982.

John Harper was a fellow of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers, a fellow of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, and a life member of both the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers and the American Society for Metals. He held a number of honorary degrees: doctor of engineering degrees from Lehigh University, Maryville College, and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute; doctor of law degrees from both Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Evansville; a doctor of science degree from Clarkson College of Technology; and a doctor of commercial science from Widener College. He was elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 1971.

Mr. Harper is survived by his wife Mary Lee and her three sons of Mt. Lebanon, Pennsylvania, and Jonathan's Landing, Florida, and by his sons, John D. of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Thomas W. of Knoxville, Tennessee. He is also survived by eight grandchildren. His first wife, Samma Lucille McCrary, died in 1979. His eldest son, Rogers McCrary Harper, died in 1980.

Mr. Harper's service to the U.S. government and to the aluminum industry was long and distinguished. During his tenure as chief executive officer of the world's largest aluminum producer, he became the spokesman for the aluminum industry. He was an ardent advocate of the social responsibility

of industry and an ardent promoter of private enterprise. He strengthened Alcoa's position as an industrial leader and led the company's penetration into promising and innovative market areas. A staunch believer in business and government cooperation, he was the friend and confidant of presidents of the United States.