



Robert G. Chapin

# ROBERT A. CHARPIE

1925–2011

Elected in 1975

*“For contributions to nuclear, electronic, photographic,  
and energy-related enterprises.”*

BY DAVID V. RAGONE  
SUBMITTED BY THE NAE HOME SECRETARY

**R**OBERT A. CHARPIE, former CEO of Cabot Corporation, died on October 13, 2011, at the age of 86, just 25 days after the loss of his beloved wife of 64 years, Elizabeth. He was renowned, nationally and internationally, for his scientific, industrial, and educational leadership in harnessing technology and innovation for the benefit of society.

Bob, as he was generally called, was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on September 9, 1925. Raised on Cleveland’s East Side, he was recognized early in life as a remarkable scholar. At the age of 12, he joined a series of classes for gifted students where he met his future wife and best friend for life. Beth was so impressed by the program that she majored in education in college and then taught exceptional students in Cleveland’s Major Work classes.

In 1943 Bob was one of ten high school students nationwide honored as a Westinghouse Scholar and received a full scholarship to Carnegie Institute of Technology, which he entered at age 17. Grateful for the opportunity, he later created the Charpie Scholars program, enabling students who demonstrate strong leadership skills to attend his alma mater.

After his first year of college, he was inducted into the US Army in January 1944 and served as a machine gunner in the Tenth Infantry Division. After his service he returned

to the Carnegie Institute of Technology and graduated with an honors BS in 1948, an MS in 1949, and a DSc in theoretical physics in 1950.

Upon graduation, Bob joined the Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL) as a physicist. He was appointed assistant director in 1955, and in the same year received the United States Junior Chamber of Commerce award as one of America's Ten Outstanding Young Men. In 1958 he was named director of the ORNL Reactor Division. During his 11-year tenure at ORNL, he was a pioneer in the development of civilian nuclear energy and an international leader in the peaceful uses of atomic energy. He served as deputy US delegate to the United Nations Advisory Committee on Atomic Energy in 1954, scientific secretary for the first International Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy in 1955, and secretary to the General Advisory Committee for the Atomic Energy Commission from 1959 to 1963.

Bob's contributions to public policy and technology extend well beyond his work in nuclear energy. In 1965–1967 he chaired an important panel for the US Department of Commerce that focused on the importance of technological change for economic growth in the United States and presaged today's debate about productivity in the American economy and the country's competitive position abroad. For his intellectual leadership, the resulting widely read document became known as "the Charpie Report."

Bob also had an impact on national discussions in other critical areas as a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the National Advisory Commission for Oceans and Atmospheres in the early and mid-70s. He was one of three persons named to a special study of the high costs and technical difficulties of the then troubled space shuttle program in 1979. This study, which was presented to President Carter, resulted in administrative changes in the space program and its subsequent improvement in meeting scheduled target dates.

Concurrent with his public service, Bob compiled a very successful record as an industrial leader. In 1961, he left ORNL

to join Union Carbide, where he rose to become president of the company's electronics division. In March 1968 he became president of Bell & Howell and in May 1969 he joined Cabot Corporation as president and CEO. During his tenure Cabot realized almost a tenfold increase in size, to become one of the 300 largest industrial corporations in the United States.

Bob served as a board member at Arch Coal, Ashland Coal, Bell & Howell, Cabot Corporation, Champion International Corporation, Federated Department Stores, First National Bank of Boston, General Cinema Corporation, Honeywell, Northwest Airlines, Schlumberger Limited, and Sprague Electric Company. He was also on the board of the MITRE Corporation, serving the US military.

As an expression of his interest in innovation and the development of new ideas, Bob was deeply committed to the importance of education at many levels. He was vice chair of the Oak Ridge Board of Education in Tennessee from 1957 to 1961, president of the Byram Hills Central School District in New York from 1966 to 1968, and a trustee of the Carnegie Institute of Technology and its successor, Carnegie Mellon University, and of Wellesley College. He also served on visiting committees at MIT (for the Departments of Nuclear Engineering and Mathematics, and the Committee for Sponsored Programs) and at Harvard (for the JFK School of Government and the School of Public Health). In 1969 he was nominated by President Nixon to the National Science Board of the National Science Foundation, on which he served until 1976.

He held fellowships in the American Physical Society and American Nuclear Society, and memberships in the New York Academy of Sciences and the Science Research Society of America. He was a member of the Commerce Technical Advisory Board, the Research Advisory Committee of the US Agency for International Development, the Research Society of America, and Tau Beta Pi, Sigma Xi, and Pi Mu Epsilon. He received honorary doctorates from Denison University, Alderson-Broadbudd College, Marietta College, and Boston College.

Bob retired as chairman of the Cabot Corporation in 1988 and, pursuing his interests in innovation, joined the Ampersand Venture Management Company as its chairman. During this phase of his life, he devoted much of his free time to his favorite hobby—great food and wine. As president of the International Wine and Food Society, he introduced people around the world to the pleasures of fine wines. When guests at his home viewed the family's extensive, thoughtfully selected wine cellar many congratulated him on the fine collection. Bob would remark, "We don't collect wine; we drink it," and then pour glasses all around.

Bob was a remarkably generous man who shared his intellect, good spirit, home, and experience with his extended family and many friends. As a member of the greatest generation, he demonstrated that hard work—and making your own luck—can lead to remarkable achievements. He is deeply missed.

His daughter Carol wrote that, even as

a national and international figure, [her father] remained a down-to-earth man who put his family first. Bob and Beth worked together on their house and in their garden, often with children, grandchildren, and dogs alongside. Education, integrity, and hard work were the basis of living their lives as well as raising their family. Bob had incredible energy and was as focused with his family as he was with his work. He believed in blending work with play, however, and games were an important part of learning, spending time together, and demonstrating luck, intellect, and good sportsmanship. The Charpie children and grandchildren shared card games, board games, sports, and puzzles with Bob and Beth and with each other.

Bob is survived by his four loving children: Richard Charpie and his wife Sally (Ward), Carol McMullen and her husband Sean Rush, David Charpie and his wife Joanne (Condakes), and John Charpie and his wife Kathy (Pate). He is also survived by his sister Edith Fickenscher, 12 grandchildren, and 8 nieces and nephews.

