STEPHEN D. BECHTEL JR.
1925–2021
Elected in 1975

“Leadership of engineers in the design and construction of energy related facilities.”

BY BARBARA RUSINKO

STEPHEN DAVISON BECHTEL JR., former National Academy of Engineering chair, patriarch of the Bechtel family and its global group of companies, pioneer in engineering and construction, devoted husband, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, and lifelong Boy Scout, died peacefully at his home in San Francisco on March 15, 2021, at the age of 95.

“Steve Jr.” was born May 10, 1925, in Oakland, California. He was the son of Laura A. Peart and Stephen D. Bechtel Sr. and grandson of Warren Bechtel, founder of engineering and construction giant Bechtel Group Inc. Steve Jr. was the company’s third chair and CEO; his son Riley P. Bechtel was the fourth, and his grandson Brendan P. Bechtel is now the sixth.

Steve enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserve after high school, did officer training at the University of Colorado, graduated from Purdue University with a BS in civil engineering in 1946, and earned an MBA from the Stanford University Graduate School of Business in 1948.

It was then that his father convinced him to join a Bechtel pipeline project in Texas as a field engineer. Over the next 12 years, Steve Jr. worked his way up the ladder to become president and then CEO in 1960, retiring as CEO in 1990 after 42 years of company service and as a nonexecutive director in 2018 after 70 years of service. Under his leadership from
the historic Beale Street office in San Francisco, Bechtel’s sales improved 11-fold, its workforce grew 5-fold, and the number of major projects soared from 18 to 119. An engineer licensed in 10 states, he extended the firm’s footprint and took on efforts of increasing sophistication.

He also used his personal values to create a corporate culture based on honesty, merit, teamwork, and fair dealing. As he put it,

“To be personally successful, as I define ‘success,’ I believe one should:

have an outstanding character;
continuously strive to improve your personal performance;
be a team player;
be a positive, constructive influence, and be involved in activities around you, both inside your company and in your community;
be open-minded, objective, and realistic—accept change as a reality, recognizing that it offers opportunities;
be a visionary—focus on areas where experience and abilities can be matched by few others, strive to foresee the industries and geographic areas that will offer the greatest opportunities for long-term profit, develop a competitive, innovative mentality, and create something new, uniquely suited to your company’s strengths;
be a hardworking participant; and
enjoy your work and show your enthusiasm for it. It will be infectious to those around you.”

The Bechtel group built iconic infrastructure on six continents and pioneered new technologies, engineering and construction methods, and socioeconomic development in low-income countries, often working in very difficult logistical situations and remote, forbidding environments. Signature projects of Steve Jr.’s tenure include the Bay Area Rapid Transit system (BART) in northern California; the James Bay
hydroelectric project in Canada; LNG plants in Algeria, the United Arab Emirates, and Indonesia; nuclear power plants throughout the United States; Jubail Industrial City and King Khalid International Airport in Saudi Arabia; and the Channel Tunnel connecting Great Britain and France.

Over and above his responsibilities with the Bechtel Group, Steve Jr. was CEO of the Fremont Group of Companies until his retirement in 1995. Fremont became a prosperous developer and manager of real estate in California, Texas, and other US locations. Through its venture capital arm, Trinity Ventures, it was an early investor in Starbucks and other successful startups. Today, it owns and operates businesses in the United States and Europe, manages a fund of funds, and is building a portfolio of valuable, publicly traded equities.

He also served as a director of several leading companies, including General Motors, IBM, and Southern Pacific Railroad; chaired the Conference Board and the Business Council; and contributed his wisdom in advisory roles at the California Institute of Technology, Purdue, MIT, and Stanford and its Hoover Institution.

He was selected to serve on six presidential commissions for three US presidents: Lyndon Johnson appointed him to the President’s Committee on Urban Housing; Richard Nixon named him to the National Industrial Pollution Control Council, the National Commission on Productivity, the Labor Management Advisory Committee, and the National Commission for Industrial Peace; and Gerald Ford asked him to serve on the President’s Labor-Management Committee.

Steve Jr. was well recognized for his contributions, honored with numerous national and international awards, including the Ernest C. Arbuckle Award for excellence in management leadership, from the Stanford Graduate School of Business (1974); the Hoover Medal (1980), recognizing him as a “Distinguished worldwide engineering leader, for his contributions in the fields of natural resources, energy, government affairs and human needs, and for his contributions to the enrichment of the lives of his fellowmen in urban housing, curtailment of industrial pollution, labor management
relationships, and realistic progress in developing countries”; the National Medal of Technology and Innovation (1991), bestowed by President George H.W. Bush, “For his outstanding leadership in the engineering profession with special recognition for his contributions to the development and application of advanced management techniques to world-class industrial projects”; and the NAE Founders Award (1999), “For decades of exceptional accomplishments in civil engineering, corporate management, and civic, educational and professional development, all of which have been of great benefit to people in the United States and around the world.” He also received honorary degrees from Purdue University, the University of Colorado, and the Colorado School of Mines.

In addition to his NAE membership, he was elected to the French Legion of Honor (1979), Royal Academy of Engineering (UK; foreign fellow, 1986), and American Academy of Arts and Sciences (fellow, 1990). He served two terms as NAE chair (1982–86) and was a member of the NAE Industry Advisory Board.

A lifelong Boy Scout, he achieved Eagle rank in 1940 and was recognized by the Boy Scouts of America with the Distinguished Eagle Scout Award and the Silver Buffalo Award. With 40,000 other scouts he attended the 2013 National Jamboree at the BSA Summit Bechtel Reserve, which he helped create years earlier with a significant donation.

Steve Jr. was an avid outdoorsman and sportsman. He and his PGA Tour partner made the Sunday cut in the 1989 AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am. He trekked to base camp at Mount Everest, hiked the John Muir and Yosemite trails, and logged more than 100 fishing and 219 bird-hunting trips around the world. He was an avid and excellent fly fisherman who not only had a favorite fly (a “yellow deer hair”) but would use it, with success, in any river no matter what time of year or what a guide had recommended. His bird hunting was not just about hitting his target but also about shots/bird.

In 1957 he established his first foundation. It and successors have distributed more than $1 billion in grants, largely to science, technology, engineering, and math education and
environmental or conservation causes. He subsequently seed-funded foundations for each of his children and grandchildren.

He is remembered as a great conversationalist and a man who generously shared his time—enjoying life and the company of others whether over a meal or coffee, hunting, fishing, golf, or tennis.

Steve Jr. is survived by his wife of 75 years, Elizabeth Mead Hogan; their children Riley Bechtel, Gary Bechtel, Shana Johnstone, Lauren Dachs, and Nonie Ramsey; 16 grandchildren; and 30 great-grandchildren.