

## Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

### Will Admiral Watkins keep the SDI alive?

To some in Washington, the most significant appointment made by President Bush was the one he waited the longest to make—that of Adm. James Watkins as Secretary of Energy.

There are three major reasons for this: 1) Watkins's familiarity with nuclear power, 2) his sensitivity to the national security aspects of energy policy, and 3) his seminal role in launching the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) program in 1983.

However, there remains a big "if," because insiders here say that Watkins has changed. They point to his "cop out" role as the head of the Special Commission on AIDS created by the President in 1986. The Watkins commission defended the "civil rights" of the virus, putting more emphasis on protecting the victims of AIDS from discrimination than on demanding a crash program to find a cure. Also, Watkins's language when his nomination was announced reflected a desire to propitiate those who, under the guise of environmentalism, are seeking to destroy the nuclear industry.

Watkins spoke of "striking a balance," a "natural harmony" between the "interests of the environment and those of nuclear energy and our national security needs."

But perhaps we should wait and see. Many say he was too far out of his element with the AIDS commission. Some strong SDI proponents are ecstatic that he was chosen for the Energy post. His role will be decisive in determining whether some of the most vital programs to the future of SDI, such as those at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, are kept alive.

### A career centered around nuclear power

Watkins's entire early career in the Navy was centered around nuclear power. He graduated from the Naval Academy in 1949, and the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School in 1958 with a masters in mechanical engineering.

He immediately joined the Navy's nuclear propulsion program, part of Adm. Hyman Rickover's joint Navy/Atomic Energy Commission program to develop small, powerful reactors to propel submarines and ships.

Watkins's first assignment was at the Atomic Energy Commission's Oak Ridge, Tennessee School of Reactor Technology, and he went from there to the Naval Nuclear Power Training Unit in upstate New York. He later served as executive officer aboard the *Snook*, a nuclear submarine.

In 1962, he joined Rickover's staff in Washington. In 1964, he took command of the *Snook*. In 1967, he took command of the *Long Beach*, the first nuclear-powered cruiser.

Over the next 15 years, he was Commander of the Sixth Fleet, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, and in 1982, became Chief of Naval Operations.

### 'Secretly, within a tiny power cocoon'

Watkins's role in the decision to launch the SDI program, announced in President Reagan's historic speech of March 23, 1983, is documented in Hedrick Smith's book *The Power Game: How Washington Works* (New York; Random House, 1988).

Smith reports, based on an interview he did with Dr. Edward Teller in early 1987, "Watkins had been worrying for some time that the nation was near a dead end in the offensive arms

race. Hunting for new ideas, Watkins lunched with Edward Teller on Jan. 20, 1983. He was moved by Teller's vibrant optimism about emerging defense technologies and his worrisome assertions that the Soviets were already hard at work on strategic defenses."

When Watkins took on the cause, Smith reports, "as a devout Catholic, he added a moral argument: 'We should protect the American people, not avenge them.' Later, Reagan hungrily grasped that line."

During a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff with President Reagan on Feb. 11, 1983, Watkins presented the idea to the President, with some critical backing from White House Chief of Staff William Clark and National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane.

It was Clark, Smith reports, who pushed Reagan to move quickly on the idea, and to develop the concept "secretly, within a tiny power cocoon," as Smith put it, until suddenly springing it on the world with his famous March 23 speech.

Smith recounts the uproar among policymakers in the administration when they heard of Reagan's plans, including an instance in which Secretary of State George Shultz yelled, "You're a lunatic!" at a colleague who supported the idea.

Smith quotes Watkins, "The President shocked the system. It's unfortunate it was done so piecemeal with people ricocheting off the walls. But maybe that's the only way to do it. If the President did it the logical way, he'd have been beaten by the bureaucrats. The problem in this town is, you can't study anything at length, because everyone studies it right along with you, and you get defeated before you start it."

Hopefully, Watkins will keep his own words in mind in his new job.