

## U.S. loses one of its best: Dixy Lee Ray

by Marjorie Mazel Hecht

The United States today suffers from an overwhelming paucity of elder statesmen who have any notion of what must be done to put the country back on its feet after three decades of precipitous decline. In this context, the death of Dixy Lee Ray at age 79, on Jan. 2, is a heavy loss to every American.

Ray was one of the great women of this century. She had many overlapping careers—scientist, teacher, elected official, policymaker, consultant, author—but through all of them she strove to learn the truth and help others find it. Her commitment to truth was uncompromising, which earned her both strong friends and strong enemies. She devoted her life to bettering the conditions for human life on this planet, remaining in battle until her very last days.

Ray is perhaps best known for her work as the chairman of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission in 1973-75. As Ray herself described the political situation, she was brought in to head the AEC because anti-nuclear forces such as James Schlesinger thought that a woman who was not a nuclear scientist could be pushed around! Fortunately, Schlesinger et al. were wrong. Ray toured the country visiting national laboratories, talking to scientists about their research work, and learning everything about nuclear power. When the oil crisis hit and President Nixon asked Ray to come up with a plan for new energy sources, nuclear took a leading role. In addition, the U.S. fusion program took shape and plans were made to develop this new energy technology before the end of the century (including the budget to get the job done.)

Ray's forceful leadership of the AEC so rankled the anti-progress faction that when Congress planned to absorb the AEC into the Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA), a special post was created at the Department of State for her, to remove her from energy policymaking: assistant secretary of state at the Bureau of Oceans. Ray held the position from January to June 1975. According to the

*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, Ray resigned, calling "then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger an egocentric man." (Schlesinger went on to be the first energy secretary under President Carter.)

Ray then plunged into politics, running as a conservative Democrat and winning the governorship of Washington State (1977-81).

### Always educating

Before being called to Washington by President Nixon in 1972 (to serve on the Atomic Energy Commission), Ray had had a distinguished academic career as a marine biologist, known internationally for her work on many special commissions and research projects. She was also a popular teacher in the zoology department at the University of Washington in Seattle, where she had joined the faculty in 1945 and remained for 30 years (although she was often on leave status).

The fact that she was well liked by students (and given top ratings, according to the University of Washington student newspaper) is a commentary on her passion for educating others and encouraging them to keep on learning. Ray took her classes to the public with a weekly series on marine biology on local public television. She also headed the Pacific Science Center in Seattle.

Ray earned a bachelor's and master's degree from Mills College in Oakland, California, and a Ph.D. at Stanford University. She received numerous honorary degrees and awards—from Phi Beta Kappa in 1937, to a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1952, to the Woman of the Year Award of the *Ladies Home Journal* and the United Nations Peace Medal in 1973. She was named one of the top 10 most influential women in the nation by *Harper's Bazaar* in 1977.

Ray loved history and literature, and often used examples from the classics to illustrate a point. Unlike many of her

critics, she also did her homework, mastering the research work in many areas out of her field in order to competently criticize new hoaxes.

### Retiring . . . to war

Ray's toughest job, and the one in which this writer knew her personally, came after her retirement when she went to war with the irrational, anti-science culture that had taken over America increasingly since the late 1960s. Ray became a leading spokesman for science and reason and against environmental hoaxes and fear. Until ordered to rest by her doctor in summer 1993, to clear up a bronchial infection, she had spent several days each week flying around the country (and occasionally abroad) to give speeches and participate in scientific conferences—a pace that would have tired out a much younger person.

She also wrote two books on environmental issues. *Trashing the Planet* appeared in 1990 and *Environmental Overkill* in 1993, both published by Regnery Gateway. Both books were coauthored with her long-time friend Lou Guzzo, a Seattle journalist (who reportedly convinced her to run for governor in 1976). Ray's aim was to reach the ordinary citizen, explaining in plain English the scientific facts of issues that have become highly emotional—alar, ozone, global warming, radiation, and so on. She tried to make it clear to a generation that takes modern conveniences for granted—and even blames technology for the world's problems—the concept of *progress* and man's responsibility to use his brain to continue making progress.

As Ray saw the nation disintegrate, its industry shut down and its culture leveled, she stepped up her activities, frustrated at the lack of courage that characterized many of her colleagues. She addressed scientists, elected officials, and beleaguered industry groups—timber workers, coal miners, food technologists, nuclear engineers, and others. Her message became increasingly sharper: If you don't fight against mindless environmentalist regulations, you'll find yourself living in a fascist police state, she told her usually more timid colleagues. She despised the cowardice of the nuclear industry and others and their stupidity in thinking that they could accommodate and be "nice" to the greenies.

Ray was unforgettable. Once you met her or heard her speak in public, whether you agreed with her or not, you would remember what she said. She had a way of telling the truth, sometimes bluntly, sometimes with charm, but always with a pungent wit.

Many groups sought her as a keynote speaker for their conferences, because they knew she would speak the truth that they were too afraid to utter. Because she was willing to put herself on the line, she was targeted (and sometimes physically threatened) by the greenies as an enemy. She had also come under attack in the press for her association with *21st Century Science & Technology* magazine and what the press termed "LaRouche." But press attacks were something Ray had become accustomed to, especially during her term



*Dixy Lee Ray, 79, one of the great women of this century. She died at her home in Fox Island, Washington, Jan. 2 of a bronchial infection. She is survived by her four sisters.*

as state governor, and she refused to accommodate to them. She wanted her articles to have as wide an audience as possible, she told critics.

Although in the last few months Ray had curtailed her public activities, she did give an interview to Associated Press the week before she died concerning the Department of Energy's much publicized campaign to declassify documents, including reports of experiments with plutonium on unknowing victims. Most of the plutonium information has been public for years, she said. It is not news. Why is the administration publicizing this now? she asked.

### To be human

The overriding message in Ray's recent books, speeches, and interviews is a profound one about what it means to be human. As she concluded *Environmental Overkill*:

"What is it to be human? It is to know both awe and humbleness, to feel both fierce passion and sweet gentleness. It is to have the grace to accept our humanity and the wisdom to discharge our responsibilities. . . .

"We can hear music in the wind and song in the sounds of the mountain stream. We can hear silence and should cherish it, too. But we have also to know that none of nature's sounds can make a concerto. It is for Man to compose a symphony or opera and for mankind to enjoy such deliberate, disciplined, and uniquely human achievement. How can the environmentalists deny their humanity?

"Alone of all the millions of species of living organisms, only we can create images with words. . . .

"It's not so bad—being human. Yes, we, and our works, will survive. Nature is tough; humans are ingenious; both are resilient."

What a better world it would be if more among us humans had some of Dixy Lee Ray's grace and wisdom.