P.S. to the NEWS
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A NUCLEAR NAVY

A famous story about Napoleon relates that, after he had conquered the European Continent, a young American inventor named Robert Fulton obtained an interview with him. Fulton spread out his designs and models for his steamboat, and described how his revolutionary new ship would enable Napoleon to destroy the wind-driven British Navy and extend his empire across the English Channel. But Napoleon said no; he literally missed the boat.

A similar story is told about how the European representative of the Holt Tractor Company, precedessor of the Caterpillar Tractor Company, tried to sell German General Von Hindenberg at the beginning of World War I on the idea of covering the newly-invented tractor with armorplate and equipping it with machine guns. Hindenberg said no. But three years later, the Allies seized the idea and made it into the tank -- the decisive weapon of World War II.

Many empires have collapsed because a shortsighted nation lacked the vision to build the weapons of the future. The United States came perilously close to that same tunnel-vision in regard to a nuclear navy. In 1948, the U.S. Navy systems analysts made a study which showed that a nuclear-powered submarine would be worth 1.41 times as much as a

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conventional submarine, but would cost twice as much. The analysts therefore concluded that nuclear power was not worthwhile.

Fortunately, we had a far-sighted and determined Admiral in the Navy who refused to be submerged by the bureaucracy. Admiral Hyman Rickover espoused the cause of the nuclear navy and, with the help of Congress and the Atomic Energy Commission, succeeded in building many nuclear-powered submarines.

The aircraft carrier launched under the Eisenhower Administration, the Enterprise, proved the value of nuclear surface ships. Yet, subsequently, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and Navy Secretary Paul Nitze insisted on building two aircraft carriers, the America and the John F. Kennedy, with old-fashioned steam turbine engines instead of with nuclear power. Both carriers were obsolete the very day they were launched.

In a recent speech in San Diego, Admiral Rickover paid tribute to Congress for trying to speed up our defense in spite of Pentagon footdragging. He warned that "A reluctance to build submarines has continued, even though the Soviets have surpassed us in numbers of nuclear submarines since 1971 and are outbuilding us by 3 to 1, and even though they now possess three times our submarine building capacity and are still increasing that capacity, and even though they have introduced nine new designs in the last seven years as compared to two for us."

The final irony of not building nuclear ships because of the cost is that oil now costs close to $25 a barrel delivered to Navy ships -- almost three times the price of nuclear power. A shortage of oil for the rest of Americans is an inconvenience, but it can be disastrous to the oil-fired U.S. Navy.

We can be thankful that Admiral Rickover has accomplished as much as he has. It is only too bad that the Navy has not always taken his advice.

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