

## **W. Kenneth Davis -- championed nuclear energy**

- [John Wildermuth, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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A memorial service will be held in October for Marin County resident W. Kenneth Davis, an energy official in both the Eisenhower and Reagan administrations and a lifelong advocate for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

Mr. Davis died at his San Rafael home July 29, just days after his 87th birthday.

"He was still writing and consulting a bit," said his daughter, Gail Greene of Novato.

Mr. Davis was involved in the development of nuclear power from the early years of the Atomic Age. Born in Seattle, he grew up in Berkeley, where he attended the University of California before earning his bachelor's and master's degrees in chemical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1940 and 1942, respectively. He was doing doctoral work at MIT when World War II ended his studies.

Color blindness kept him out of the Air Force, so he went to work for Standard Oil of California, now known as Chevron. He also taught engineering for years at UCLA.

In the early 1950s, Mr. Davis was manager of development and engineering for a Standard Oil subsidiary. The subsidiary was building a pilot model of the Materials Testing Accelerator at what was to become the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. The accelerator, which was never completed, was designed to produce large amounts of plutonium and tritium for nuclear weapons.

He moved to the nonmilitary side of nuclear development in 1954, when he joined the Eisenhower administration as deputy director of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. A year later, he took over as head of the reactor development division, which was crucial to the birth of the civilian nuclear power industry.

Mr. Davis left the Atomic Energy Commission in 1958 and joined San

Francisco's Bechtel Corp., the giant construction firm that was picked by the government in 1959 to build the nation's first nuclear power plant.

As vice president of nuclear reactor development, Mr. Davis traveled the world promoting atomic power and helping Bechtel become a world leader in energy development.

Mr. Davis returned to Washington, D.C., in 1981 as deputy secretary of energy in the Reagan administration.

It wasn't a happy time in his career, his daughter recalled.

"My dad really liked (Ronald) Reagan, but he didn't feel any progress was being made in the Energy Department," she said. "He said that there was so much politics in the job, and he wasn't a politician, he was a scientist."

Mr. Davis left government for good in 1983 and went back on the road as a consultant. He continued writing about nuclear energy and the role he believed it should play in the world energy picture.

An article he wrote in 2000 about increasing California's energy supply, for example, talked about how "nuclear power could be a very strong competitor based on economics."

In 2002, he was one of the authors of an article in Science magazine that argued that U.S. nuclear plants and their spent fuel casks were much less vulnerable to terrorism than their opponents said.

"To tell people that they and the Earth are in mortal danger from events that cannot cause significant harm is to play into the hands of terrorists by making a minor event a cause for life-endangering panic," the article said.

Mr. Davis also caused a stir in 2001 when he wrote that Nevada's Yucca Mountain, which he originally identified in the 1980s as a possible nuclear disposal site, should be mothballed because of the problems, both political and environmental, in shipping and burying the nuclear waste.

"It is not necessary to inflame the anti-nukes any more than necessary," he wrote in an unsolicited memo to the Bush White House.

But Mr. Davis saw the tide of public opinion turn against the nuclear power industry he helped develop. Since 1978, no new nuclear power plants have been ordered in the United States. Marin County, where he lived for years, declared itself a nuclear-free zone.

As a staunch Republican and nuclear power advocate, "he wasn't too popular here," his daughter said. "But around the world, people are clamoring for nuclear power plants."

Mr. Davis was an enthusiastic skier and hiker. He was captain of the UC Berkeley ski team and an expert rock climber who in 1936 was in a group of three climbers who made the first ascent of the Royal Arches route at Yosemite's North Dome. He also was a lifelong fan of opera and classical music.

In 1993, Mr. Davis received the Henry DeWolf Smyth Nuclear Statesman Award from the American Nuclear Society and the Nuclear Energy Institute. He was a former president of the Atomic Industrial Forum and the American Institute of Chemical Engineers, and was a member and fellow of many other professional associations.

He was married for 57 years to Margaret Bean Davis, a noted Bay Area pianist and composer who died in 1998. Mr. Davis is survived by his second wife, Ann Nilsson Davis of San Rafael; a brother, Keith Davis of Grand Lake, Colo.; two daughters, Gail Greene of Novato and Kerry Davis of Kentfield; a son, Warren Davis of Lafayette; and five grandchildren.

Contributions can be made to the Margaret and Kenneth Davis Memorial Scholarship Fund at the Marin Music Chest, P.O. Box 468, Ross, CA 94957; Stem Cell Research Foundation, 22512 Gateway Center Drive, Clarksburg, MD 20871; or the Marin Agricultural Land Trust, P.O. Box 809, Point Reyes Station, CA 94956.

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