

A Final Farewell to an Old Friend

by Phil M. Landrum*

From the era of the Springfield Rifle to the day of the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile; from our early motions toward world leadership, through two World Wars and the incredible first years of the Atomic Age, the life of one man emerges as the *single most* consistent and influential authority on defense posture of this Republic.

That man was Carl Vinson—one of the truly great Americans of all time.

On the eve of his retirement in 1964, he was presented the Presidential Medal of Freedom with the citation: "Master legislative captain, helmsman, and navigator, his fixed Star has always been the national interest."

Carl Vinson's role in the growth of United States seapower was spectacular. While Vinson was Chairman of the Naval Affairs Committee, he had a habit of speaking possessively of "my navy". Several Presidents considered him for the post of Secretary of the Navy, but when President Truman asked him to take the position, his response was characteristic: "No, I am not interested. I prefer to run the Navy Department from here."

Truthfully, Vinson did run the Navy Department from his seat in Congress. Acts initiated in his committee between 1931 and 1940 led to an almost total rebuilding of the United States Navy.

In 1934 he wrote the Vinson-Trammell Act—one of the most significant acts in American Naval History. It gave legal sanction to the policy that the United States be brought to full treaty strength in all categories and provided for a continuing replacement of overage ships.

Then, in 1938, Vinson began the first of several expansion acts that authorized construction culminating in the most modern and powerful navy afloat by the end of World War II. His efforts were rewarded in 1940 when President Roosevelt signed into law the bill authorizing a two-ocean

* Former Ninth District Congressman from Georgia. Mr. Landrum served in Congress with the late Carl Vinson from 1952 to 1965. This tribute is a collection of selected comments contained in the eulogy delivered by Mr. Landrum at Mr. Vinson's funeral in Milledgeville, Georgia on June 3, 1981.

navy. It came almost a year and a half before Pearl Harbor and enabled the United States Navy to make the necessary preparations for its tremendous war-time expansion. These achievements revealed Vinson as a statesman with vision. While the United States was caught by surprise at Pearl Harbor, the military and industrial forces and facilities needed to recover from the tragedy and prepare for war had actually been set in motion by the Vinson acts of 1934, 1938, and 1940. As Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz said: "I do not know where this country would have been after December 7, 1941, if it had not had the ships and the know-how to build more ships fast, for which one Vinson bill after another was responsible."

Carl Vinson's national interest was not confined to military preparedness. In 1952 he spoke regarding foreign policy and said:

It [foreign policy] recognizes that people of different nations are not fundamentally different. Wherever hunger, poverty and despair are found, freedom is in jeopardy. . . . *Just as at home*, the only answer to Communism is good health, better homes, enough to eat, and above all, hope for the future of a free world.

His interest and concern for the general welfare, while not as universally known as was his expertise in defense matters, was appreciated by those he took behind closed doors to analyze the proposals for federal assistance in education during the Kennedy years. Only a few knew that *his* recommendations resulted in the basic provisions for Federal Financial Assistance to all levels of education.

He knew how to yield—without surrendering, and he had a beautiful capacity to teach others.

This nation faced a textile crisis in early 1961. Our markets were disappearing. Foreign textile competition was rampant. Mr. Vinson organized a volunteer group in the House of Representatives and his action and leadership saved thousands of textile workers their jobs.

Underneath the political symphony he so expertly conducted there was a loyalty and devotion to family and country that endeared him to constituents, fellow legislators, and to history.

Congress is the combined product of those who have served in it since it was founded. Carl Vinson will surely go down in history as one of those who added more honor to that body than he took from it. As late President Lyndon Johnson said: "He belongs with the Clays, the Websters, the Calhouns, and the Rayburns as a legislative giant."

He could appear commanding, gruff or stern, while really he was as Carl Sandburg says—"Tough as tempered steel but soft as drifting fog."

Outwardly, Vinson's gruffness terrified the unprepared. Inwardly, there was a man of time-tested beliefs who over the years had steered through a maze of conflicts and complexities to give the United States an adequate

defense. Vinson shaped legislation for national defense—laws for the growth and modernization of first the Navy and later, *all of the armed services*.

He served with nine presidents, eighteen secretaries of War and Defense, twenty-four secretaries of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, four Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and over fifty admirals and generals who had headed the air, land, and sea forces. He had been at the forefront of national defense planning longer than any of these men.

He first entered Congress to serve with Woodrow Wilson. He participated in the vote to declare war in 1917. He served during the 1920's and the boom and bust period that followed. He was a voice in the wilderness before Pearl Harbor, and after that attack, led us through that great period of building a war machine that won victory, and then through the period of meeting the communist threat.

Throughout all of his fifty years of public service, Mr. Vinson never compromised his basic beliefs relating to national security. His basic theme remained the same—peace depends upon a strong defense and defense planning divorced from partisan politics.

One of our nation's great political lives has come to an end—but there is to come next March,¹ the day, as he said in his last illness, “when the ship hits the water”—his spirit will revive us all to a new patriotism and inspire those who serve on its decks to reach the quality of citizenship exemplified by Carl Vinson.

1. The U.S.S. Carl Vinson is scheduled to be launched in March 1982.

