

United States Atomic Energy Commission formed

As the United Nations Atomic Energy Commission failed to come to grips with the growing nuclear weapons problem, the United States worked to establish its own formal organization. The transition from military civilian control of nuclear energy was defined in the *Atomic Energy Act* (also known as the McMahon Act) of August 1, 1946.

Senator Brien McMahon played a key role in the transition. He was the first chairman of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy from 1945 to 1947 and the principle author of the bill that created the United States Atomic Energy Commission.

He had previously chaired the Senate's Special Committee on Atomic Energy that was formed when the attempt to establish a joint Senate and House committee on atomic energy failed. This failure occurred during the debate on whether to maintain military control over atomic energy or to transfer it to civilian control.

Earlier, the powerful, secret and high level Interim Committee was created in May 1945 and chaired by Secretary of War Henry Stimson. It was this committee that literally made the recommendation to President Truman to drop the atomic bomb on Japan without warning and instead of a demonstration explosion.

After the war ended the Interim Committee continued to exert substantial influence and recommended the first policy action on the control of atomic energy. It was known as the May-Johnson bill and included substantial powers granted to the proposed commission. The bill also concluded that government control of atomic energy was necessary.

Many of the scientists at Oak Ridge and other locations opposed the bill because it maintained military control over nuclear research. They felt free interchange of scientific information should be resumed now that the war was over. Others joined in the opposition to the May-Johnson bill including several legislators. President Truman withdrew his support.

This struggle resulted in the May-Johnson bill being replaced on December 20, 1945 by a substitute bill drafted by Senator Brien McMahon. General Groves opposed this bill as he saw it as too weak on security and it transferred control of atomic energy from the military to a civilian commission.

The first version of the bill included the following words in the first section titled, Purpose of Act. ..."(2) A program for the free dissemination of basic scientific information and for maximum liberality in dissemination of related technical information." It also contained a "Section 9" which included, "(a) Basic Scientific Information. Basic scientific information in the fields specified in section 3 may be freely disseminated."

As you can see, the intent was to share scientific information freely. However, the purpose of the act was modified and Section 9 dropped entirely between the December 20, 1945 version and the final version of August 1, 1946. Much debate took place and many things changed during those several months of iteration and exchange of ideas.

Much of the nation's political attention was on the subject. A growing suspicion of the Soviet Union's intent regarding the creation of its own nuclear weapons led to the United States decision makers taking more and more conservative approaches to control of this new and most powerful energy source.

Next we will see what was happening in the Soviet Union and also in Oak Ridge as the discussion regarding atomic energy and the control of all things associated with the emerging technology continued. An expanding dialog was emerging in the press as well as in the government. Some very unusual ideas surfaced and in hindsight they are often humorous.