

USAEC, David Lilienthal and Oak Ridge

While Oak Ridge and Hanford continued to produce nuclear materials, significant discussion about how to control atomic energy continued. The drift from an early desire for international control shifted drastically toward a more nationalistic approach.

The United States Atomic Energy Act of 1946 was passed through Congress after much debate and many changes. What began with the intent to share this new technology with the world, soon became restricted to the extent that even our allies were not to have access. The Act was signed by President Harry Truman on August 1, 1946.

It was intended to maintain civilian government control over the technology developed from atomic research and development. The act also removed control of the actual production of nuclear weapons from the newly forming technology from the military and gave that control over to the civilian government. This was a major change in direction and was not at first welcomed by the military.

Y-12 continued to produce uranium 235 at ever increasing pace and began to take on added workload with regard to producing nuclear weapons. The assembly work that had been done at Los Alamos on Little Boy as well as the Gadget and Fat Man was beginning to cause difficulties for the scientists and workers there. The laboratory did not lend itself to production work.

K-25 continued to increase its capability to produce uranium 235 at ever increasing enrichment until by the end of 1946, Y-12's Beta Calutrons were no longer needed. The uranium 235 being provided by K-25 was of sufficiently high enrichment.

Decisions were being made that had tremendous impact on the workers at Y-12. They saw the grand production of first the Alpha Calutrons and, near the end of the year, the Beta Calutrons being brought to a halt. They were busily placing the Alpha's in standby and then it became obvious that they never would be used again and soon the same could be said for the Beta's.

Meanwhile, during 1946, other strong leaders began to emerge in the field of atomic energy. Where General Groves had held a close rein on scientists during the Manhattan Project, once the war ended, many of these scientists began to quickly move into other organizations. Political struggles became more pronounced as everyone tried to adapt to the new world after atomic energy.

One leader who emerged quickly was David Lilienthal. He had been quietly doing his job in support of the Manhattan Project through managing 12 major electrical power generation construction projects to supply electricity. By far the largest customer was Oak Ridge.

David Lilienthal had been named one of three directors of the newly formed Tennessee Valley Authority in 1933. Recall the first dam built by TVA was Norris Dam on the Clinch River. One reason the Manhattan Project was located here in East Tennessee was the close proximity to the dam for electrical power. Little did anyone realize just how enormous the demand for electricity would become as the Manhattan Project grew to be the largest single customer for electrical power.

The demand for electrical power resulted in TVA building more and more dams on the various rivers near the Manhattan Project. The electricity was sent to Oak Ridge, but that was never published during the war. Lilienthal once described the TVA as "the largest producer of power for war in the Western Hemisphere."

He was born in Indiana on July 8, 1899, to Jewish immigrants. At 23 years of age he received a law degree from Harvard Law School.

Next we will examine David Lilienthal's career and how he came to be selected to this most influential position. We will also see that he did not have a smooth time of it and eventually resigned rather than support the "super" or thermonuclear bomb.