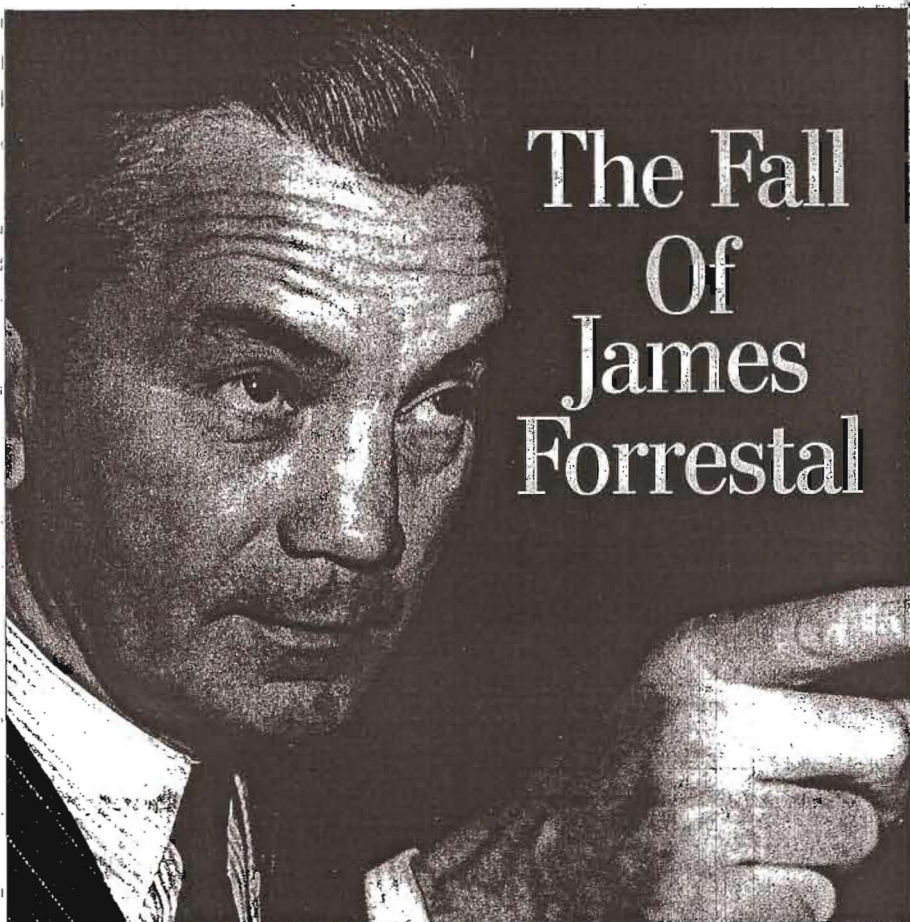


SUNDAY, MAY 23, 1999



The Fall Of James Forrestal

When America's first secretary of defense dove from a 16th-floor window at Bethesda Naval Hospital precisely half a century ago, he left a poem, a mystery, and 50 years to understand what he'd been trying to tell us.

By ALEXANDER WOOLEY
Special to The Washington Post

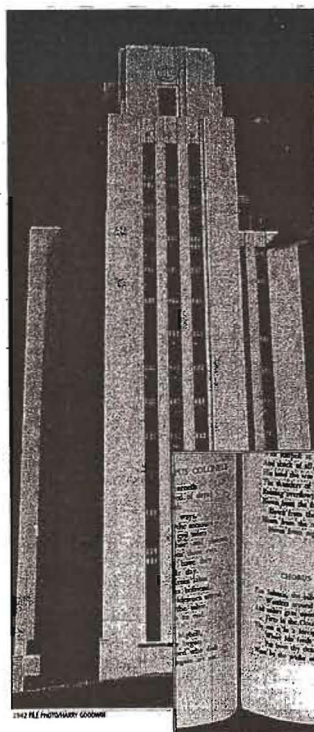
His hand moved across the paper, copying Greek poetry from a thick anthology. Then, abruptly, mid-sentence, it stopped. He slipped the paper inside the book and set it aside. His room was on the 16th floor of the towering Bethesda Naval Hospital. It was 2 a.m. Sunday, 50 years ago. Exactly 50 years ago yesterday. His name was James Vincent Forrestal.

Forrestal was an American hero during America's most heroic era. Tough and combative, small but dashing, he combined the ascending genius of American capitalism with the can-do drive of a New Deal bureaucrat. The result, when results mattered most, was that he transformed a ramshackle Navy into the most powerful armada the world had ever seen. He'd been instrumental in winning a war, The War, and was among the first to clearly perceive the dark shape of its aftermath and the looming Cold War with Soviet Russia. His life had been as glamorous as it was successful, but he had attracted powerful and bitter enemies, not the least of which, perhaps, was his own tortured soul.

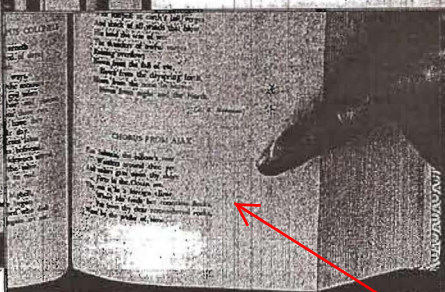
For one who had lived in great wealth, his hospital room was simply furnished—a narrow bed, a straight-back chair, an Oriental carpet on the dark tile floor, a rotating fan on the wall by a closed window. Closed and locked. Three windows in the room, all securely locked.

He went across the corridor to a small lablike kitchen, with locked filing draws, white tile walls, stainless steel and glass cabinets. There, above a radiator, an open window. He phased out a screen, stepped onto the sill, leaped into the void.

Later, after they found him, broken, 13 floors below on a low roof, they searched his room for clues to his last moments. There was the book, "An Anthology of World Poetry," still open to an excerpt from Sophocles' "Ajax," still containing the paper on which he'd copied the poet's words.



James Forrestal walked across the hall from his guarded hospital room to find this unlocked window (above) on the 16th floor of the Bethesda Naval Hospital (left at arrow). He had left this copy of "An Anthology of World Poetry" (below) open to a poem by Sophocles, which may have contained clues to his final thoughts.



James Forrestal's Final Undoing

FORRESTAL, Photo by

"We were sure he'd be the one. No question, with the resources he had, he'd be the one, the perfect nightingale," he'd begun, stopping short, in mid-sentence. "Night" he wrote. Then punched out a window.

Most Likely to Succeed

Forrestal's life was pure Jazz Age, the kind of man who would be Scott Fitzgerald's hero. From humble beginnings he rose to become a New York millionaire and then Washington power broker. Money, power, glamour, inactivity, sex and an infinitely deep sense of the absurd.

He was born in Uxbridge, Massachusetts, not far from FDR's Hyde Park, in 1892. His family was more middle class, Irish and Jewish. The young Forrestal was known as a serious student and a hard worker. The editor of the *Matthewson Journal*, where Forrestal worked after high school, noted he was "beyond range of his age level."

He applied to Princeton, just one month away, bright student from Newburgh, reaching for the gold ring, and was turned down. But he kept at it, just accepted, found a way to afford the Ivy League. He quickly established himself, becoming editor of the *Daily Princetonian*, member of Schola Cantabrigia, and voted "Most Likely to Succeed."

In 1915, Forrestal's senior year, he almost left to fight in World War I. This became one of the unexplained mysteries of Forrestal's life. He never spoke of it. The man was one that seemed almost anomalous events in the private lives of public servants to remain private. Eight tenths of a century later, Princeton has no records that can shed light. His biographers can only speculate.

What is clear is that his abrupt departure was not a happy one. He did not return home, and appears to have permanently severed ties with his parents. He moved to New York and found a job as a clerk/handyman, then spent 15 months working well below the station of his Princeton classmates, before he landed a position with William A. Read and Co., a New York investment banking firm that later became Dillon, Read and Co.

Though he began modestly, selling bonds in Uxbridge, New York, he charged back on track. His accession in the financial world was recognized by the *Wall Street Journal*. He earned a reputation as a hard worker and a conservative before being posted to Washington for the duration when his superior officer refused to part with such an able administrator.

Back at Read and Co., he made a partner at 31, about the same time that he was promoted on the rise, he shared an apartment on Washington Square and fell in with a high-fiving group that became known as the "Four Horsemen." Forrestal's new life featured a new set of parties with a new set of money, and he moved at Oyster Bay, suite made in London, and trips to the opera accompanied by various odd, connected women.

In 1926, at 34, Forrestal married Josephine Bonaparte, a French aristocrat, and they had a family party. The two had begun an affair a year earlier after a cocktail party at Willis Left Bank, Jr. as she was known, was wealthy and independent, and a few years before had been married to a French aristocrat. His personal was taken by Cecil Beaton, one of the premier photographers of the day. Tall and slender, she decked herself out in furs and jewels, frequented speakeasies and was invited to parties by the likes of the likes of George Germain and P.G. Wodehouse.

From their first apartment on Washington Square, the couple bought a 30-acre estate on the fashionable north shore of Long Island, where they cultivated their term social careers. Forrestal accumulated enough young women to "21," and in his wife held court at the Porsian Room of the Plaza Hotel, where she had been linked to the man who had been the top carries with it the seeds of its own destruction.

All the partying did not slow Forrestal's rise. By 1932 it was estimated he was worth \$5 million, which today would be roughly the equivalent of \$500 million. In 1933 Forrestal had built at the corner of 49th Street and Beekman Place a five-story Georgian-style house with a brick library and circular staircase. One night, returning home in her own from the Plaza, Jo was nibbled at the pumpkins of \$50,000 worth of jewelry while her husband slept upstairs. The circumstances of the crime were reported in the *New York Times*.

The couple had two children, Michael in 1927 and Peter in 1930. By most accounts, James and Jo were too absorbed to be parents. According to the 1963 biography "James Forrestal: A Study of Personality, Politics and Policy," by Arnold A. Rogow, Forrestal understood this shortcoming, and kept a black notebook inscribed with a diagram of the American family, as short on love, too strict, too preoccupied to engage emotionally.

Success

Forrestal was not a tall man, but tough-looking, gritty and manly in the hard-boiled style. At Princeton he had taken up boxing and he continued to box at the New York Athletic Club while on Wall Street, twice breaking his

knuckles, but also brutal and nice to younger people.

Paul Nitze, a Wall Street colleague of Forrestal's, recalled finding him a young man in 1929. Nitze, now 92, had recently become special assistant to Clarence Dillon of Dillon, Read. He was impressed with Forrestal. "He was full of confidence, the world was his. He was highly energetic, and even more liked him. He had many friends on Wall Street."

But Forrestal's prominence and success also attracted the attention of a 1930 congressional panel investigating the stock exchange. Forrestal was called to appear before the investigators to answer questions about his creation of a company in 1929 into which he put \$800,000 of tax-deductible income. Though the investigation was clear—that he may have been attempting to create tax obligations—nothing came of it.

From all accounts Forrestal handled the questions well, but according to biographer Douglas Brinkley, the experience affected him for weeks afterward, weakening his confidence and causing him to scratch at peevish scale on his neck till the drew blood. In 1940, after 20 years on Wall Street, Forrestal worked connections and was offered a job in Washington, eventually as undersecretary of the Navy. Before making up his mind, Forrestal sought counsel from the younger Nitze. Nitze replied:

"I asked him, 'Do you think you'd be any good at it?' He said 'I don't know.' I asked, 'Well, what do you have to lose, what would you do if it didn't work out?' He answered that he would come back to Dillon, Read & Co. 'Well, what do you expect if it doesn't do it for you?'"

"Thank you," he said to me, smiling. "I'll do it. But on one condition, that you come with me." "Is that legal?" I asked. "Who cares?" he replied.

Nitze, then 33, became Forrestal's assistant.

The ironic part of the war effort—retroking a country that had no money, potential but was clearly unprepared—matched Forrestal's seven-day-work-week personality. He moved an able administrator and a dedicated public servant, though his annual salary had risen to \$10,000 a year, compared with something like 20 times that in New York.

To popular acclaim, Forrestal succeeded Frank Knox as secretary of the Navy in May 1940 after Knox died suddenly of a heart attack. He continued to drive the service along at his own pace. When he had come to Washington, the fleet had comprised some 1,110 vessels and 161,000 officers and sailors. By 1945 there were some 50,000 warships and 1,100,000 men in the service.

Though some observers called Forrestal humorless and obsessed, Nitze saw it differently. "He thoroughly believed in the war and what it could do," Nitze says. "People genuinely liked him, the easy, witty confidence."

Noisily disputes that Forrestal got the job done. From construction to procurement, organization, doctrine and war fighting, the United States without Reagan, without family pressure, the two had begun an affair a year earlier after a cocktail party at Willis Left Bank, Jr. as she was known, was wealthy and independent, and a few years before had been married to a French aristocrat. His personal was taken by Cecil Beaton, one of the premier photographers of the day. Tall and slender, she decked herself out in furs and jewels, frequented speakeasies and was invited to parties by the likes of the likes of George Germain and P.G. Wodehouse.

War-time photographers caught Forrestal, vigorous and unsmiling, turning battle sites in the Marshall Islands, France, the Mediterranean. At two times he went ashore just four days after the bloody invasion, the battle site rugged, at the advice of his admirals, and saw Marines raise the flag on Mount Suribachi. As the flag went up, Forrestal is said to have turned to Marine Corps Gen. Holland "Howling Mad" Smith and said, "Well, raising that flag means a Marine Corps for the next 500 years."

As his Navy helped turn the tide of war overseas, his family began to disintegrate at home. The Forrestals took a house at 3808 Avenue of the Stars in Georgetown, and Jo boarded her horse at the Aachen estate in McLean, where it was exercised by a young Jacqueline Bouvier.

Jo brood in the sodas of official Washington. "Washington was drinking heavily then. In the drunkenness, something even darker emerged. She was tormented by screaming hallucinations, paralytic fits, and the 'Reds' were after her and her family. She underwent a treatment in New York, but Forrestal was frequently called from work to deal with his wife's crises. He never discussed her illness, and the sometimes public incidents must have been deeply painful to him. One time she passed out at the dinner table at a function at the British Embassy, or when she suddenly kicked at a small child walking along Constitution Avenue."

Nielsen Hickey, a young doctor and foreign affairs adviser who began working in Forrestal's office in 1948, observed the corrosive effects of Forrestal's personal problems. "There wasn't any sort of home for him where he could relax," Hickey recalls. "He went to work early and came home late, and there wasn't any success."

One widely repeated story about this period in Forrestal's life has it that one evening, finding him in his office at 9:30 one evening, looking haggard and miserable, suggested that he go home, prompting Forrestal to reply bleakly, "Go home? Home to what?"

As Forrestal's marriage collapsed, his name became linked to leading Washington socialites of the day. Many chose to him as a social lion, but his political life became a combination of personal activity and professional triumph. But with the war's end and victory, came a new president and a new era. Forrestal's political life would become defined by conflict and, ultimately, disappointment.

Forrestal was among the first to recognize the Soviet Union as a threat, by the postwar Soviet Union. A student of the intellectual underpinnings of the Russian Revolution, he became convinced that the Soviets were driven by ideology to attempt world domination, and thus found himself a key roadblock



Above, in 1948, Secretary James V. Forrestal, left, and President Harry S. Truman relax in Key West. Right, Josephine Bonaparte, Forrestal's wife in 1946 formal portrait.

in the way of President Truman's desire to reap the rewards of victory by drastic reduction of defense spending.

In fact, Forrestal found himself standing against his president on other key issues—he opposed making the support of the new state of Israel a pillar of American foreign policy (at least in part because he was keenly aware of the Navy's dependence on cheap Arab oil) and fiercely campaigned against Truman's desire to curtail the Navy's independence by unifying all branches of the military.

Forrestal was no meager opponent for a new president, and his influence in the shaping of the half-century to follow was powerful.

His opponents who had not been given his proper due, as far as postwar foreign policy is concerned, says John Lehman, secretary of the Navy from 1981 to 1987, during the Reagan administration. Lehman, who pointedly installed Forrestal's desk in his office, beneath Forrestal's portrait, says: "He was the real author as far as I am concerned of America's policy of containment of the Soviet Union."

Paul Nitze reveals that Forrestal went on to entertain higher ambitions. "He said to me he thought he would like to run for president, but was worried about what Truman would think of his idea if he found out."

Despite Forrestal's open opposition to Truman's goal of a unified military, and possibly in part because of it, in 1947 Forrestal was appointed the chief of staff of the Army. Robert Patterson, the chief advocate of service unification, turned it down. All of a sudden it was in Forrestal's interest to quiet his rebellious admirals and make unification work.

But his appointment did not end inter-service rivalry, nor did it secure Forrestal's position. In the well-received recent biography "Driven Patriot: The Life and Times of James Forrestal," authors Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley argue that conflict with his own secretary of the Air Force, Stuart Symington, a passionate advocate of the supremacy of air power, played a key role in his professional and personal decline.

Forrestal had been a longtime ally of Symington, using his contacts to help Symington achieve the presidency of Emerson Electric in St. Louis, a company that prospered through the war thanks to contracts to build electric gun turrets for Air Force bombers. Two of the men's sons, both 11, supervised each other in 1938 at St. Bernard's school in New York, collaborating on a scam to outfox their teachers, who insisted on *mano a mano* boxing matches the boys abhorred.

"You used to have to stand toe-to-toe on a chalk line," recalls James Loyston, the minute your toes moved from the chalk line, you lost. So we dreamed up the 'Forrestal Cup' where we agreed to throw lots of leather but never hit each other. The teachers couldn't understand how we were taking so much punishment."

Their mock battles oddly prefigured their future: Forrestal and Symington, like Symington, 46 when he came to Washington, was also converted to Truman through important Missouri allies, including Clark Clifford, who by 1947 was the president's special counsel. Despite Symington's career debt and political ties to Forrestal, in his new role he seems to quickly have become one of Forrestal's chief antagonists. Stuart Symington, 46 when he came to Washington, was also converted to Truman through important Missouri allies, including Clark Clifford, who by 1947 was the president's special counsel. Despite Symington's career debt and political ties to Forrestal, in his new role he seems to quickly have become one of Forrestal's chief antagonists.

An escalating round of disputes reached a breaking point in July 1948 when Symington departed from prearranged remarks in a speech in Los Angeles amid criticism of the Defense Department leadership for supporting the maintenance of aviation wings in the Army and Navy, both of which he regarded as beyond the times.

The press reported Symington's remarks,

and Forrestal, furious, called Symington on the carpet. According to Brinkley and Hoopes, Symington at first denied ever having said anything contentious, but was forced to admit it when a Navy lieutenant produced a tape of his speech.

Forrestal considered firing Symington, but fear of being accused of anti-Air Force bias stopped him, disappointing advisers who felt Symington was a serious threat.

Symington's son Jim disputes that the two men disliked each other, or that his father, later a senator, had it in for Forrestal.

"They differed over the role of the Air Force, and there was a disagreement about that speech, but all that was patched up later," Hickey says. "The other Forrestal partisans found Symington an ideologue whose effect on Forrestal was corrosive. 'Symington was galvanic, intense, on a personal mission,' Hickey says. 'He just wanted to separate the military from the rest of the national defense establishment.'"

Battles of Defense

The problem between the two was complicated by Forrestal's ambiguous position. Though he was the superior, Symington had more of Truman's confidence.

Forrestal's emergence as both a leader in the formation of postwar policy and a vulnerable figure within the Truman administration made him a lightning rod for two powerful forces of the Washington media who specialized in personal attacks. Beginning in 1947 and intensifying in the fall of 1948, Walter Winchell and Drew Pearson both fiercely slammed Forrestal for his Wall Street ties and his lavish parties.

Pearson in particular was relentless, going after any hint in Forrestal's past, real or contrived, that he was a tax evader based on testimony from the 1929 testimony to Congress concerning his tax shelter. The 1937 robbery in front of Beekman Place was retold to imply, without citing evidence, that Forrestal had walked from an upstairs window (which he was robbed, and beat the house in fear of his own life).

Marx Lewis, a Forrestal aide, told biographer Brinkley that he and others close to the defense secretary believed Stuart Symington might have supplied Pearson with some of the dirt on Forrestal. Brinkley quoted Pearson's view as acknowledging that the journalist and Symington were good friends.

"I think Symington was feeding Pearson with false information on Forrestal, and I thought he was reprehensible for doing it," says Nitze.

But what ultimately may have proven more toxic to Forrestal's career in government were not false reports about him, but his secret support for the presidential candidacy of Republican Thomas B. Dewey, who opposed Truman in the 1948 campaign.

At the time, the stories of Forrestal's secret support for Dewey were only rumor. But Dewey did later tell Rogow, Forrestal's 1963 biographer, that he had indeed met with Forrestal during the run-up to the election to discuss the possibility of retaining him in a Republican Cabinet.

Dewey lost, and on Jan. 11, 1949, Forrestal met with Truman at the White House and learned that Louis Johnson would be appointed his successor, a stark defeat not only for Forrestal personally but for the policy he had championed most passionately. Johnson wanted to slash America's defense spending. In contemporary news accounts, Forrestal's fall from power was reported as a resignation rather than a dismissal, but it was entirely clear that he had been fired.

Psychiatrists who later treated Forrestal would backdate the onset of his depression, insomnia, restlessness and weight loss to the point. Forrestal's strength, energy and composure deserted him. His double-breasted

suit began to hang looser and looser. He appeared to age years in the space of weeks.

Nevertheless, he was present at Johnson's swearing-in at the Pentagon on March 28. At the White House for his final goodbye, he was moved and flustered to find that Truman had assembled the entire Cabinet and Joint Chiefs of Staff to honor him.

The next day he was warmly received at a special meeting of the House Armed Services Committee. Also present were the three secretaries of defense, including Symington. Forrestal praised his longtime political opponent for his "real and high devotion to his beliefs."

When the meeting was over, Forrestal prepared to drive back to a special transition office to answer congressional letters sent to him from across the country. His mood was buoyant, as Forrestal aides Leva and John Only later recalled.

Only and Leva said Symington asked to accompany Forrestal on the ride back to the office. According to Forrestal biographers Hoopes and Brinkley, when Leva, who followed in another car, arrived at Forrestal's office a short time later, Forrestal was in a chair with his hat still on, staring at the wall.

"A troubled Leva inquired if everything was all right. Forrestal did not reply and seemed unaware of everything around him. He persisted for some time, but Leva responded, saying, 'You are a loyal fellow, a phrase he repeated several times.'"

Without further explanation, he stood up and went home.

According to a private memo by journalist Arthur Krock, written May 6, 1949, and based on the recollections of those involved, Ferdinand Eberstadt—Forrestal's lifelong friend and Princeton classmate—called on Forrestal and said he wanted to see the man.

Forrestal's voice was strange. "For your own sake, I advise you not to," he replied. Eberstadt, now deceased, went anyway.

The door was opened by the servant. Forrestal came down the stairs looking thin and haggard, his skin hanging loose at his neck. He was babbling incoherently. The house was wiretapped, and strangers were watching him from the street corner. He was terrified that the communists were after him.

Eberstadt arranged for Forrestal to be flown to Hobe Sound, Fla., where Jo and some friends were staying. Eberstadt also arranged for William Menninger, one of the country's most prominent psychiatrists, to fly to Hobe Sound. It was decided that as soon as possible, Forrestal would be admitted to the Bethesda Naval Hospital for extended treatment.

That night Forrestal slept soundly with the help of a sedative. Early the next morning, a nurse went to see if Forrestal slept through it. Eberstadt awoke, though, and went down to see to it that he was not. He took a memo, someone reported back to Pearson that Forrestal rubbed out of the house when the nurse left (in reality likely Eberstadt going for his swim), thinking the Russians were invading. Leva, Brinkley and other staff said that hanging by a thread, Forrestal was not safe from leaks.

The Retreat

Those who trace Forrestal's last decline from a buoyant mood at his farewell to near madness to his death in 1952 say that Symington said something during the shared car ride that pulled the legs out from under him.

Symington's son Jim doesn't believe his father ever said anything of the sort. "I don't have had animosity, he said, why would they have ridden alone together in a car on that day of all days? But he is a liar," he would speculate. "Forrestal was suffering at home, and he was in a bad mood. He had said something like, 'Look, Jim, you should have stuck with the [big] [Truman], rather than throwing in with Dewey.'"

Symington also maintained that Forrestal called his father-in-law, Eugene Bonaparte, after his hospitalization, asking for a lawyer. It is unclear why.

"My father remembered Clark Clifford," he said. "He was a very good lawyer, a very good conversation, and why would he have called Dad if they were enemies?"

No record remains to confirm this story, though the news release issued by Bethesda on the day of Forrestal's death did state that the "improving" patient had been allowed visitors and free use of the telephone.

On April 2, Forrestal was admitted to Bethesda Naval Hospital. He was in a "depressed" state. News reports called him "worn out" and the diagnosis for public consumption was "operational fatigue." As he stepped out of the limousine that had brought him, he was asked to get out of the car. He did not expect to leave the hospital alive.

Forrestal was assigned to the VIP suite at the top of Bethesda's tower, although mental patients were generally accommodated in a nearby one-story building.

According to contemporary medical reports, Forrestal had about 22 pounds from his already wiry physique in the previous three months. New York City cops kept round-the-clock shifts on Forrestal's accommodations, and he was also looted in by psychiatrists. They noted that his anxiety increased on the news of the Korean War.

Forrestal apparently spent May 21 at a relatively healthy state of mind, eating a large steak for lunch. Special suicide-watch restrictions had been lifted, and he had been given access to a small, walled-in garden. His regular tranquilizers had been reduced, and he declined the one pill he was offered Saturday night. He stayed up late, reading. A regular corpsman whom Forrestal liked had gone off with a nurse who was a nurse. His regular tranquilizers had been reduced, and he declined the one pill he was offered Saturday night. He stayed up late, reading. A regular corpsman whom Forrestal liked had gone off with a nurse who was a nurse. His regular tranquilizers had been reduced, and he declined the one pill he was offered Saturday night.

The date was now May 22, Sunday, the day of Pearson's weekly broadcast, which had become an agonizing ritual for Forrestal. Forrestal was reading the poetry anthology, and began to copy from "Chorus From Ajax" on Pages 277 and 278. He stopped after the first line of the poem, kept round-the-clock shifts on Forrestal's accommodations, and he was also looted in by psychiatrists. They noted that his anxiety increased on the news of the Korean War.

See FORRESTAL, FS, Col. 1

According to the coroner's report, Forrestal likely then jumped out the window and hung for some seconds suspended. The report also notes scuff marks on the cement work underneath the window, indicating reflexive kicking, or possibly terrified second thoughts. To no avail: The sash gave way and Forrestal fell 13 floors, landing on an asphalt-and-crushed-stone surface of a third-floor passageway roof. Death was instant.

The coroner noted that the sash was still wound tightly around his neck. The front of his skull was crushed, his abdomen slit, and his lower left leg severed. The report notes that his watch was still running.

Last Words

Why would a man about to kill himself copy an ancient Greek poem, but not complete it? Was there any connection between the words he copied and his last, desperate act? Hoopes and Brinkley believe that more than mere chance might be at play. They note that after the end of World War II, the National Security Council authorized the recruitment of members of former Ukrainian death squads, who had worked for the Nazis exterminating Jews and Red Army supporters, to work clandestinely within the Soviet Union assassinating communists. The name of the group was *Nachtigall*, or *Nightingale*. Ironically, while one wing of the CIA was secretly bringing *Nightingale's* leaders to the United States to train them, another wing of the agency was in Europe working to bring them to trial in Nuremberg. The secret program, which Forrestal almost undoubtedly helped bring about, failed, however. The biographers postulate that Forrestal, in his unsedated state, may have felt a shock of guilt—or, given his reds-under-the-bed delusions, paranoia—that may have triggered suicide.

But perhaps there is another, less strained connection between Sophocles' verse and Forrestal's tragic end. Perhaps the key was in the verse that immediately followed the one containing the word "nightingale," the verse Forrestal could not bring himself to copy:

*Oh! when the pride of
Graecia's noblest race
Wanders, as now, in darkness
and disgrace,
When Reason's day,
Sets
rayless—joyless—quenched
in cold decay,
Better to die, and sleep
The never-waking sleep, then
linger on,
And dare to live, when the
soul's life is gone.*