

H-Bomb Pioneer Edward Teller Dies at 95

Teller, a dinosaur of nuclear thinking, dies

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Edward Teller, a pioneer in molecular physics dubbed the "father of the H-bomb" for his role in the early development of nuclear weapons, died on Tuesday, a Stanford University spokeswoman said. He was 95. Elaine Ray, a spokeswoman for the Stanford University news service, said Teller had suffered a stroke earlier this week and died at his home on the university campus on Tuesday.



A naturalized U.S. citizen born in Hungary, Teller was a key member of a group of top scientists who fled Hitler's Germany and ended up working on the Manhattan Project, the secret program that developed the atomic bomb.

After the war, Teller pressed the case for a continued strong national defense, persuading President Harry Truman of the need for the far more powerful hydrogen bomb.

The United States detonated the first H-bomb on the Pacific atoll of Eniwetok in November 1952. It was 2,500 times more powerful than the atomic weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, which prompted Japan's surrender and brought World War II to a close.

"It wasn't a choice. Nuclear energy existed," Teller told a newspaper interviewer shortly before his 80th birthday. "We would have found it no matter what we did. It's sheer arrogance to say we created the bomb."

Earlier in his career Teller also taught physics and helped set up a graduate department in applied sciences at the University of California.

"Edward Teller was one of the world's leading scientific minds of the 20th century, and he made a major contribution to the security of our nation and world peace," University of California President Richard C. Atkinson said in a statement.

At the time of his death, Teller was a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford, specializing in defense and energy policy.

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Although he had retired from his post as director emeritus of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, a major U.S. nuclear weapons labs, he continued up until his death to come into his office there, about an hour away from his home, three or four times a week, a spokeswoman for the lab said.

Born in Budapest in 1908, Teller completed his Ph.D. in physics under Werner Heisenberg in 1930 at the University of Leipzig and did post-graduate work in Copenhagen with pioneering Danish nuclear physicist Niels Bohr.

Teller was director of the Livermore lab from 1958 to 1960 and professor of physics at the University of California from that time until his retirement in 1975.

The H-bomb, never used in warfare, was the linchpin of the "MAD" (mutually assured destruction) defense doctrine that kept the United States and Soviet Union at bay during the Cold War.

Teller said he regretted Truman's decision to drop the A-bomb on Japanese cities, saying he felt the weapon should have been tried first in a demonstration in hopes Japan's leaders would have been impressed enough to end the war.

Considered too hawkish by many of his colleagues, Teller argued that the absence of defense can bring disastrous results, citing Hitler's takeover of Hungary as evidence.

He came under fire in the 1980s when he helped convince President Ronald Reagan (news - web sites) the United States should spend billions of dollars on a space-based defense umbrella that came to be known as "Star Wars."

Critics said the system, based partly on laser-equipped satellites designed to shoot down enemy missiles, was unfeasible and too expensive. Teller won the day, but the ambitious defense umbrella remains a work in progress.

Teller is survived by a son and a daughter, four grandchildren and one great grandchild.