Robert A. Riesman, 85; former Democrat activist, business leader, philanthropist, counsel to many

BY SCOTT MacKAY
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

PROVIDENCE — Robert A. Riesman, 85, of Providence and Middletown, a leading Rhode Island business executive, philanthropist and Democratic Party activist, died Wednesday at Miriam Hospital.

Mr. Riesman excelled in so many fields that his friends viewed him as a Renaissance figure: a man who was a decorated World War II veteran, an expert on military strategy, a business leader and an adviser to generations of Democratic political figures.

"He was a great American," said Sen. Jack Reed in an interview yesterday. "He was one of the most cultured, decent men I have ever met, a connoisseur of books and wine and art."

Reed, who spoke with Mr. Riesman about three or four times a week, said he could expound on many topics, "from poetry to military strategy."

"I sought his advice about books, about politics and about life," Reed said.

Mr. Riesman was also close to former U.S. Sen. Claiborne Pell, of Newport. "Bob Riesman was a close friend and neighbor," said Pell's wife, Nuala. "Claiborne is very upset about this. We are going to miss him terribly. He did so much for us and for this state."

Said Rabbi Wayne Franklin of Temple Emanu-El in Providence, "He was a giant of a man, extremely wise and generous with his wisdom."

Mr. Riesman was the husband of Marcia (Stone) Riesman. He was born in Chelsea, Mass., on Jan. 25, 1919, the son of the late Joseph G. and Sadie (Finkelstein) Riesman.

He graduated from Boston Latin School and was a 1940 honors graduate of Harvard University. After graduation, he entered the Army as a second lieutenant, field artillery. He served five years with the First Infantry Division, three of them in North Africa, Sicily and Europe, attaining the rank of lieutenant colonel. He was awarded the Silver Star, Bronze Star, Purple Heart, Army Commendation Medal, six Battle Stars, the Assault Arrowhead, numerous campaign ribbons, and the French Croix de Guerre and Medaille de Reconnaissance.

He joined the family business, the Royal Electric Co., in Pawtucket, in 1945, and when it was acquired by ITT in 1956, served as president until 1961. He joined the Carol Cable Co., Pawtucket, and was president until 1968, when he resigned to pursue private interests.

Active in Democratic politics, he was co-chairman of John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign in Rhode Island, and chairman of Lyndon Johnson's local presidential campaign in 1964.

Mr. Riesman served as finance chairman for Frank Licht's successful bid for governor of Rhode Island in 1968, while also working on Hubert Humphrey's presidential campaign the same year. In 1976, he was Rhode Island chairman for Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson's bid for the Democratic presidential nomination.

From 1963 to 1969, he served as civilian aide to the secretary of the Army, and when he left the post to become a member of the Rhode Island Board of Regents for Education, he received the Distinguished Civilian Service Medal, the highest award the Army can give a civilian. He served on the Board of Regents until 1973, having become chairman in 1972. He served as trustee of the Association of the United States Army for 10 years, and was chairman of its finance committee.

He served as general campaign chairman of the United Way of Southeastern New England in 1972 and remained active in that organization as a member of the executive committee and board, as well as vice president for a number of years.

He had been active in the affairs of Providence College since 1964 and received an honorary doctorate in business administration from PC in 1972. Elected to its corporation in 1974, he became a trustee in 1992, chairing its finance committee for many years as well as the President's Council and becoming trustee emeritus in 1998. From 1971 to 1977, he served on the visiting committee of the board of overseers of Harvard University for the Graduate School of Education. In 1981, he was elected a corporator of Northeastern University. He was a founding trustee of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Active in local and national Jewish communal affairs, he was general campaign chairman of the Jewish Federation of Rhode Island in 1964, 1967 and 1968, and after serving as its vice president since 1970, was president from 1974 to 1977. He was a member of the National Council of the American Jewish Committee, was Rhode Island chairman of the Israel Bond campaign in 1961, and served on its executive committee and on the board of the Development Corporation for Israel.

He was a life trustee of the Miriam Hospital, the Jewish Home for the Aged, and the American Technion Society, an overseer of the Jewish Theological Seminary, a past board member of the Council of Jewish Federations, and an honorary alumnus of Hebrew University, in Jerusalem. A former vice president of Temple Emanu-El, he was an honorary life trustee. He was a national vice president of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, having served as regional vice president for New England, a member of the National Executive Committee of the American Jewish Committee, and a trustee of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs.

He was a member of the Jewish War Veterans, B'nai B'rith, and the Anti-Defamation League. In 1979, he and his family dedicated the Riesman Center for Harvard-Radcliffe Hillel, in Cambridge.

In 1976, he received the Brotherhood Award from the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and was a recipient the next year of the Hope Award from the Rhode Island State Council of the Knights of Columbus. In 1977, he was commissioned a brevet colonel in the Newport Artillery Company. In 1979, he received from the Rotary Club of Providence its first Distinguished Citizen Award.

He was a director of the Old Stone Corp. and Old Stone Bank from 1967 to 1990, and a director of the Narragansett Electric Co. from 1979 to 1989.

He was a member of the Turks Head Club, the University Club, the Hope Club, the Harvard Club of Boston since 1946, the Harvard Club of Rhode Island, the Harvard Faculty Club, and the Palm Beach Country Club and the Clambake Club of Newport.

Besides his wife, he leaves a son, Robert Riesman Jr. of Oak Park, Ill.; a daughter, Jean Riesman of Jersey City, N.J.; two brothers, Martin Riesman of Newton, Mass., and Eugene Reisman of Montreal; two grandchildren; and 11 nephews and nieces.

A funeral service will be held tomorrow at 11:30 a.m. in Temple Emanu-El. Burial will be in Sharon (Mass.) Memorial Park.

RIESMAN, Robert A. June 2, 2004. Residence, 140 Freeman Parkway, Providence. Beloved husband of Marcia (Stone) Riesman. Devoted father of Robert A. Riesman, Jr. Oak Park, IL and Jean A. Riesman, Jersey City, NJ. Adored grandfather of Abraham and Claire. Dear brother of Martin Riesman, Newton, MA and Eugene Riesman, Montreal. Funeral Service 11:30 a.m. Sunday at Temple EmanuEl. In lieu of flowers, contributions may be made to Miriam Hospital, 164 Summit Ave., Providence, RI 02906 or the charity of your choice. Shiva will be observed at his late residence, Sunday 7-9 pm and Mon.-Wed. 2-4 pm and 7-9pm. The family was assisted with the arrangements by SUGRMAN-SINAI MEMORIAL CHAPEL.