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Science and the News

The Space Administration: It Was Once Criticized for Slowness But Is Now Criticized for Speed

If the nation's space technology moves along with anything like the speed being shown by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in its administrative decision-making, there may be ample justification to support the intrepid optimism of those who believe the U.S. will land men on the moon before the Soviets.

In a recent 30-day period, from 24 August to 23 September, NASA has selected Cape Canaveral for expansion into a site from which the U.S. will launch its manned space flights to the moon and beyond; picked a government-owned ordnance plant in New Orleans for the fabrication of launching vehicles; named Houston, Texas, as the location for a new $60-million space-flight command center for manned missions; hired new subleaders; and revamped its organizational structure.

Some measure of the rapidity with which NASA has been lining up its ducks for the moon shot is apparent in the fact that both NASA public information specialists and newsmen alike have been caught unawares by the sudden stacatto of "immediate releases" from NASA officialdom, each release spelling out a key and expensive decision for the future of the country's multibillion-dollar space effort. Information on NASA's reorganization, for example, was released on Saturday afternoon, pulling science reporters away from their day off—an unholy act in press agentry.

All this suggests that a new sense of urgency pervades the space agency. If there is a single factor reponsible for this sense of urgency it seems to be James E. Webb, NASA's administrator. Webb is a nonscientist and makes no pretense about the fact. But he is what President Kennedy wanted for the job—a man of keen political acumen, commendable experience in government and industry, and a man who understands policy-making and organization. Webb is also gaining a reputation as the Capital's most mellifluent speaker.

Webb has already appeared before one or another congressional committee more than 30 times, and just when he thought the debating and question-answering were behind him for a while, as he recently told a National Press Club luncheon, the Senate Aeronautical and Space Sciences Committee had scheduled a new set of hearings on NASA's program for 26 September.

Paradoxically, NASA, which has often been criticized for moving too slowly, is now being criticized for moving too fast. The Senate hearings, Webb said, were being held to reexplore the 10-year space effort asked for by President Kennedy because of a feeling in and out of Congress that the multibillion-dollar program had been accepted too quickly. (The hearings were postponed by the Senate Committee at the last minute because of scheduling difficulties.)

Certainly, the public debate that was anticipated following the President's challenge to the nation on 25 May that Americans should go to the moon never materialized. Similarly, congressional debate was limited to some expressions of skepticism, but little more, and the Administration got almost all of its $1,784,300,000 request. What debate there was came largely from some scientists who questioned whether the moon trip was necessary and asked whether the vast sums needed to finance a manned expedition to the moon might be better spent for a host of terrestrial challenges. But even these critics have become less critical of late.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the fact that President Kennedy's 10-year, $35-billion proposal has met with an eloquent silence and an eloquent acceptance is causing concern among many of the Administration's political observers. These observers know that this year's request for appropriations will be the smallest request for the next decade and that the requests for ever-increasing NASA funds will be decided on an annual basis. If the public or Congress waivers in its support of the effort, a set-back could prove disastrous.

If, for example, the thrill of U.S. space events or the pressure of Soviet successes wears thin, it might take a more mature public attitude to sustain the effort. It is for this reason that NASA must, concomitant with its rush to the launching pads, attempt to create better understanding of what it is trying to do, and why.

Space officials are not unaware of this potential dilemma. Webb, for example, always takes pains to underscore aspects of the 10-year space

program other than those related to manned lunar expeditions. And NASA's recent reorganization, in addition to streamlining the chain of command and tightening up an organization that grew topsy in a hurry, reflects the shotgun attitude. The changes place emphasis on four major areas of NASA's 10-year program: manned space flight, including lunar exploration; space sciences, in terms of unmanned scientific investigation of space, the moon, and the planets; practical applications of space technology, including operational weather and communication satellites; and advanced research and technology in both aeronautics and space.

Moon Czar

Webb's insistence that NASA's program must be accepted as more than just a race to the moon is also one of the chief reasons he has steadfastly fought considerable pressures that a "czar" be appointed to head the manned lunar effort. It would not be an understatement to suggest that Webb's biggest headache today is trying to provide NASA immunity against "czaritis."

Even before President Kennedy threw down the moon gauntlet on 25 May scientists and industrialists, both in and out of government, were grousing for a moon manager the likes of Leslie Groves or William F. Raborn or Hyman Rickover. It is little wonder that the press promptly dubbed D. Brainerd Holmes, a Radio Corporation of America executive picked by NASA to head its newly created Office of Manned Space Flight Programs, the "moon boss." It is now apparent, however, that there will be no moon boss for the present, at least. Holmes will report directly to Robert C. Seamans, Jr., NASA's associate administrator. So, too, will the heads of the three other newly created NASA offices established in the recent reorganization (to be effective 1 November). Rather than by a czar, the lunar program, as well as all other NASA activities will still be controlled by a "troika-like" board comprised of Seamans, Webb, and NASA's deputy administrator and scientific spokesman, Hugh L. Dryden.

Nonetheless, pressure will still be brought to bear on Webb, on the little publicized but powerful National Aeronautics and Space Council (headed by Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson) and on President Kennedy to appoint a czar to oversee the manned lunar effort if for no better reason than to personify the sprawling, complex inanimateness that characterizes a modern technological endeavor.

In the coming months the nation will again, or still, depending upon one's view, be treated to a plethora of space news. During the first two weeks in October, earthbound space experts will describe every detail of space research to the 12th International Astronautical Congress meeting in Washington (1–7 Oct.) and to the American Rocket Society's "Spaceflight report to the nation" (9–15 Oct.) in New York. Hopefully, these meetings will be capped by the test firing of the Saturn booster, the earth-orbit of a chimpanzee, and with effort and luck, the earth-orbit of the first U.S. astronaut before the year's end.

Continuing debate will also center on everything NASA does or does not do. The military can be counted upon to carp that space doings are really its responsibility, as the Soviets demonstrate. And almost every aspect of the civilian space program will invite stereophonic controversy in and out of government: solid boosters versus liquid boosters; big boosters versus rendezvous techniques; instruments versus men.

One cannot quarrel with these intramural squabbles among experts. After all, NASA is spending, or will spend, almost 1 percent of the gross national product over the next several years, and its every success or failure has military, political, psychological, and social import for all men.

But one can question whether the public might not become confused or sated, if it is not already. One wonders, for instance, how many Americans can or even want to distinguish between Ranger and Rover, a Saturn and a Surveyor, a C-1 and an S-1.

There is the danger that the entire space program has been sold on the attractive supposition that the U.S. will beat the U.S.S.R. to the moon. Conceivably, the U.S. could lose this race. What now seems to be called for, and NASA is beginning to realize this, as is reflected in its reorganization, is the need to create a better public understanding of the nation's space needs and aims.—HOWARD SIMONS.

While Howard Margolis is on vacation, his section will be written by guest reporters. Howard Simons, this week's guest, is on the staff of the Washington Post.

Fish Flour: Action by FDA Starts Row over This Promising Answer to World's Need for Protein Foods

Fish flour, an inexpensive, tasteless food supplement with great potential for ending protein deficiencies in newly developing nations, is en route to becoming the subject of a confusing public controversy in Washington.

At issue is a preliminary action by the Food and Drug Administration which has the effect of withholding approval for sale in this country of flour made from whole fish. The final decision hinges on a lengthy review process, possibly including public hearings. FDA estimates the review may take "a minimum of 8 to 10 months." Its decision may well be followed by a court appeal.

Though the wholesomeness of the product is not questioned, FDA said it may have to be regarded as "adulterated" because the flour is "made without the removal of those portions of the fish, including the intestines and the intestinal contents, that are not normally regarded as acceptable for human food in the United States."

Ironically, the developers of fish flour feel there is little potential market for the product in this protein-rich country. Their attention is fixed on the flour's possible uses in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where marked protein deficiencies afflict massive numbers. FDA approval is not required for shipment abroad, but health authorities in many nations look to FDA for guidance and insist on its stamp of approval before they will allow importation of an American food or drug product.

With foreign concern about FDA approval in mind, the BioVin Corporation, of Monticello, Ill., a domestic producer of fish flour, petitioned FDA for "standard of identity" for its product.

BioVin's petition to the FDA had the tacit support of some Administration officials, who were concerned that Soviet propaganda might find a choice issue in the United States' sending abroad a foodstuff that it would not permit its own people to eat.

Extremely distressed by the FDA treatment of the petition, those interested in the development of fish flour have been enlisting congressional and Administration support to bring pressure on FDA. FDA, in turn, has complained about threats to its integrity. As one newspaper account put it, FDA officials "fear that approval of the flour would undermine their agency's program of keeping foul matter out of food." It