

Space Budget: Down 20 Percent in 1 Year—at Least

Just a year ago the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, with a budget of nearly \$5 billion a year, was still pursuing ambitious "post-Apollo" plans to follow the manned lunar mission. Even then, however, NASA was casting apprehensive glances at Congress, and for good reason. By late fall the Congress, principally because of the stringencies of a wartime budget but also because of the disenchantment of some with the space program, had cut NASA's appropriation for fiscal 1968 (which ends 30 June) to less than \$4.6 billion. Now it is clear that, again this year, the NASA budget will be deeply cut.

On 2 May, the House of Representatives, accepting reductions recommended by the Science and Astronautics Committee and making others on its own, passed, by a vote of 262 to 105, a space authorization bill fixing NASA's budget at just over \$4 billion. The next day the House Appropriations Committee formally approved appropriations for NASA which were roughly in the amount authorized. Thus, barring further reductions, the NASA budget for fiscal 1969 will be some three-quarters of a billion less than the amount the agency proposed to the Bureau of the Budget and about \$370 million less than the budget submitted to Congress.

Sharp as the House cuts have been, NASA could have suffered worse, for, last year, the appropriations approved for the agency were substantially less than the authorized ceiling, and money to begin the big \$2.5-billion Voyager program to explore Mars in the 1970's was eliminated. While predictions are hazardous, especially now when costs of the war are uncertain and influential congressmen are insisting on deep spending reductions as a condition for a tax increase, NASA may get by with no other major cuts this year, even though congressional action is far from complete.

The House actions have followed a sequence which would seem bizarre to anyone not used to Congress' way of often playing fast and loose with its own rules. According to the rule book, the space authorization measure fixing the spending ceiling should clear Congress before either House acts on the space appropriation bill. The fact is, however, that, when the House acted on the authorization bill last week, many members knew that the appropriations subcommittee which handles the NASA budget already had trimmed the space agency's funds by nearly \$370 million (the House itself may act on the NASA appropriation before this article appears). The 2-hour debate preceding the House vote amounted to little more than playacting.

For example, Representative James G. Fulton, a Pittsburgh Republican and senior minority member on the Science and Astronautics Committee, solemnly proposed reducing funds for the "Apollo Applications Program" (AAP), which is to include earth-orbital workshops for long-duration manned flight and an orbiting man-tended telescope mount. He wanted the \$439.6 million NASA requested for AAP cut to \$253.2 million, a reduction four times as severe as that recommended by his committee. Congressmen from Texas, Alabama, Louisiana, and Florida, all states having major NASA centers, rose

in protest, and some spoke darkly of the danger of falling behind the Russians in space. Adoption of the Fulton proposal was never in doubt, however, nor was the adoption later of a Republican proposal to cut NASA's administrative funds by \$43.5 million.

Still intact after last week's House actions were NASA's latest proposals for planetary exploration in the 1970's, plans calling for two Mars "orbiter" flights in 1971 and two Mars orbiters plus small survivable "landers" in 1973 (as a modest substitute for the now-dead 1973 Voyager mission). The initial appropriation for the 1973 Mars flights may be deferred, however, on the chance that funds will be more freely available next year. The Science and Astronautics Committee has expressed the hope that, in preparing its next budget, NASA will consider additional missions for the 1970's, such as a Venus swingby to Mercury, a flyby of Jupiter, and a "Grand Tour" flyby of Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune.

The Senate Aeronautical and Space Sciences Committee last year made surprising cuts in the planetary program, but the committee seems more sympathetic to NASA's current plans. Indeed, by inviting Frederick Seitz, president of the National Academy of Sciences, and two other scientists to testify before it recently, the committee appeared to be trying to encourage better public understanding of space science and the practical benefits which may flow from it. For instance, Gordon J. F. MacDonald, executive vice president of the Institute for Defense Analyses, suggested that, through study of the moon and the planets, scientists may be better able to test theories as to the cause of earthquakes.

Once the Senate has acted on the space authorization bill, the principal issue to be resolved with the House may be whether to support the Nerva I nuclear rocket engine development. This 10-year development is expected to cost \$600 million, and the House Science and Astronautics Committee concluded that, given existing budgetary pressures, it should be deferred. Some members were concerned lest Nerva, which would demand increasingly large sums in the future, cause a diversion of funds from planetary exploration and other space science activities. But Senator Clinton P. Anderson, the chairman of the Senate space committee, is keenly interested in Nerva. Part of the work on this project is done at Los Alamos, in his home state of New Mexico.

There is a substantial overlap in membership between the Senate space committee and the Senate appropriations subcommittee responsible for the space budget, and, partly for this reason, NASA usually is in less danger of deep appropriations cuts in the Senate than in the House. All things considered, space enthusiasts may have reason to hope that, with NASA's fiscal 1969 budget already virtually certain to be down 20 percent from its budget of a year ago, the agency will escape further reductions. Again, however, it must be stressed that the intense maneuvering within Congress and the Administration associated with the tax-cut proposal has made the budgetary prospects for nearly all agencies uncertain.

—LUTHER J. CARTER