

## NASA: Sacking of Top Black Woman Stirs Concern for Equal Employment

On 25 October, James Fletcher, administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, summoned Ruth Bates Harris, deputy assistant administrator for equal opportunity, into his office and fired her. In so doing, Fletcher may have precipitated just the sort of pressure for improving NASA's employment performance with women and minority group members that critics say it has so far managed to resist.

NASA was pushed into the spotlight as civil rights and women's groups rushed to the defense of Harris and members of Congress demanded explanations from Fletcher. The issue also points up the frustrations and conflicts

in many government agencies over programs to advance minority groups at a time when the watchword, more than ever, is economy.

Ruth Bates Harris is a black woman who gained a national reputation in the 1960's for her work as director of the Human Relations Commission in the District of Columbia. When NASA established a separate office for equal employment opportunity and contract compliance in 1971, they asked Harris, then human relations director for the Montgomery County, Maryland, school system, to head it.

Harris says there were problems right from the beginning, when she found her title was not to be director,

but deputy director, and that the Office of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) would be supervised by the director of industrial relations. Harris says that she was frustrated by middle management's undermining of her office's authority and by lack of firm support from the top and that several times she considered resigning.

Finally, last April, following pleas from her and her staff, the EEO office was elevated to a position where its chief had direct access to Fletcher. But instead of naming Harris assistant administrator for equal opportunity (the new title), they put Dudley McConnell, a black physicist and former head of the NASA Scientific and Technical Information Office, in the position and named Harris his deputy.

It was apparently clear from the beginning that McConnell's approach was incompatible with that of the people who ran the two major components of the office: Harris, who, in addition to being his deputy, supervised the in-

## National Institute of Education: Congress Administers

The National Institute of Education (NIE) is like a ship that steams out of harbor on its maiden voyage and promptly runs aground. Only a year ago the agency was launched with the apparent blessings of both Congress and the Administration, but now Congress is well on the way to administering NIE a paralyzing budget cut.

NIE spent about \$106.5 million in the last fiscal year, and President Nixon asked for \$162.2 million for the agency in his fiscal 1974 budget. Mainly as a result of action in the Senate, however, NIE now seems likely to get an appropriation of \$75 million, some \$30 million less than last year and less than half the amount requested in the budget.

Congress has still not acted finally on the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) appropriations measure which contains the NIE funds. And there is a general uncertainty about HEW funding, since the President may again veto the HEW money bill (*Science*, 21 September). But House-Senate conferees have reportedly agreed on the \$75 million figure for NIE, and the agency is in the process of reviewing its program to see how it can come to terms with the draconian reduction.

NIE's nemesis on Capitol Hill this autumn was Senator Warren G. Magnuson (D-Wash.), chairman of the Senate appropriations subcommittee which handles funds for HEW. Magnuson is a somewhat unlikely antagonist, since he has not been known as being either very active or highly opinionated on education issues. His animus toward NIE, however, was unmistakable in

debate on the Senate floor on 4 October when the Senate HEW appropriations bill was passed.

In the case of NIE, the usual congressional appropriations pattern was reversed. The Senate usually ups the amount voted by the more parsimonious House Appropriations Committee, and a compromise is struck in conference on a figure somewhere in between. In this case, the Magnuson subcommittee came in with an original recommendation that NIE get a bare \$50 million. This was raised to \$75 million by the full Appropriations Committee, and this sum was accepted by the House conferees. The House bill actually called for \$142.7 million.

What happened is by now fairly widely known, but the question of why it happened still puzzles some well-informed observers. Magnuson made it clear that he was dissatisfied with the replies of NIE director Thomas K. Glennan, Jr., to his questions on what NIE was doing and what it planned to do in the future. He also read into the record correspondence from a state college president in his own state expressing the view that NIE might be "stifling broad participation in educational research." There were also reports that NIE staff had been rude in dealing with Capitol Hill staff and that NIE's congressional relations in general are badly underdeveloped. NIE, however, is a yearling agency, and the reaction seems to exceed the provocation.

NIE's troubles are ascribed by some to general Congress-Executive hostility caused by Watergate, the impoundment by the Executive of funds voted by Congress, and, particularly, the long wrangle over the HEW budget. Another theory is that the Democrats were look-

house affirmative action programs, and Joseph Hogan (who is white), who headed the contractor compliance division.

According to Harris and several of her former associates, there was a great deal of frustration in the office arising from their belief that McConnell was not committed to real change and that he was turning the office into a public relations outfit. They felt that McConnell, who at 37 is NASA's only black in the administrative stratosphere of "supergrades," was a servant of the establishment and did not identify strongly enough with the needs of minorities. McConnell says that Harris continued to act as though she were running the office, that she was uncooperative and uncompromising, and that she did not seem to be fully aware of the bureaucratic restrictions government employees must work under.

At any rate, Harris, Hogan, and Samuel Lynn, a black contract compliance officer, decided the office was going nowhere. "After months of

agonizing," she says, the three of them put together a report—on their own time and money—documenting their belief that NASA's equal opportunity effort was "a sham."

The report, submitted to Fletcher in late September, points out that the number of people in minority groups employed by NASA has gone up only 1 percentage point—from 4.10 percent to 5.19 percent—since 1966. Women (almost all of them clerical workers) make up 18 percent of the NASA work force. Most women and blacks hold civil service grades below GS 9, despite the fact that 70 percent of all NASA employees are at GS 10 or above. "At the present rate of increase, NASA would reach only 9 percent minority employment by the year 2001!" laments the report. The authors said efforts by the office to speed things up had been thwarted by the fact that its recommendations on hiring were often ignored or overruled and that the quantity and quality of equal opportunity officers at NASA's ten research

and space centers left much to be desired.

The report rounds off by raking McConnell over the coals and asking that he be removed from office. McConnell is accused of "an apparent lack of integrity" in his communications between management and staff and "immaturity in relation to people." (A case in point was McConnell's use of a little bell to summon his secretary, a practice that, says Harris, earned him the sobriquet of "Mr. Ding-a-ling" and made the EEO office a "laughingstock" within NASA. McConnell, wincing at the memory, says the bell was a little souvenir given him by his wife and he is very sorry indeed about having used it.) In sum, wrote the authors, in only 5 months, "he has impaired the integrity of the office and made a mockery of the equal opportunity program."

Hogan, Lynn, and Harris delivered the report in person to Fletcher and went over it with him point by point. Fletcher, they say, agreed that NASA's record was dismal and arranged to

## Unkind Cut to New R & D Agency's Budget and Image

ing for a place to make cuts to compensate for substantial increases they have made in the Administration budget and settled on NIE because the agency is new, is identified with the President, and lacks a constituency with clout.

All these factors probably contributed to NIE's difficulties, but some of the troubles can be traced to basic issues on policy-making. The idea for an independent agency to administer high-quality education research dates back at least to the late 1950's, but it took recognizable form as NIE in the Nixon education message in 1970. The proposal won bipartisan support on Capitol Hill but failed to make its way through the legislative mill until it was passed as part of the Higher Education Amendments of 1972 and was signed into law in June of that year.

The agency got its start with the transfer of about 80 people and \$90 million worth of programs from the Office of Education. Glennan was nominated as director last October and confirmed promptly by the Senate. The first real note of discord between Congress and the Administration over NIE was struck when the White House delayed appointing the 15-member National Council on Educational Research prescribed in the law establishing NIE. The council is not the usual ceremonial advisory body appended to most federal research funding agencies; it is charged with formulating the "general policies" of the agency and is expected by NIE's congressional patrons to do just that.

The Administration's nominations to the council were not announced until last June, and major policy and pro-

gram decisions had to be held up. In the interim the milk of congressional kindness toward NIE began to curdle.

Whether the White House delay in naming the council was caused by Watergate drift or, as was asserted, by efforts to find the best possible people is now an academic question. During the interregnum, Congress was urging NIE to both act independently and not to make major decisions before the council was ready to have its say. These conflicting signals obviously did not make NIE's first year easier.

Glennan has borne the brunt of congressional criticism, particularly in his encounters with Magnuson. The NIE director, an economist who worked for the RAND Corporation before he came to Washington, D.C., was assistant director for planning research and evaluation at the Office of Economic Opportunity when he took the NIE job. Until he ran into the Magnuson buzz saw, his reception on the Hill had not been hostile, although it was noted that he had little experience with either education politics or congressional customs.

Certainly NIE has received little effective support in its time of trial from Republicans in Congress or from the Executive. Nor did Democrats in Congress friendly to NIE make much headway when they tried to mount a salvage effort. But perhaps the unkindest cut of all is the failure of the education community to mount a serious rescue effort. Some educational researchers, for various reasons, have been hostile to NIE, but if they think federal support of education R & D will flourish even though NIE does not, they too are probably due a rude shock.—JOHN WALSH