

Navy Secretary Torpedoes a Think Tank

A bizarre dispute has broken out between Secretary of the Navy John Lehman and the University of Rochester over the management of the Center for Naval Analyses, a Navy-funded think tank that the university operates under contract. In essence, Lehman wants the university to fire the center's president and install a former Pentagon official in the post. University of Rochester officials have refused, and as a result, the university is likely to lose the \$19-million-a-year contract.

At issue is the center's political independence from the Navy. University officials argue that allowing the Navy to name the center's president will compromise the integrity of its work. The center, which is based in Alexandria, Virginia, was established in 1967 to provide an independent source of advice on a broad range of naval policy, but its independence would be lost if the president owes his job to the Secretary of the Navy. "How could the taxpayer rest assured that the Navy is getting high-quality independent advice?" asks Donald Hess, the university's vice president for campus affairs.

The bizarre aspect of the dispute is that neither Lehman nor any other Navy official has expressed dissatisfaction to the university with the center's work under its current president, David Kassing. Lehman, it seems, wants to find a job for a friend and is prepared to compromise the center's independence to do it.

According to University of Rochester president Robert Sproull, there were rumors last summer that the center was in bad odor with the Navy, but when he and Hess asked various officials what the problem was, they were assured that there was no problem. On 13 December, however, Sproull received a telephone call from Melvyn Paisley, assistant secretary of the Navy for research, engineering and systems, informing him that Lehman was dissatisfied with the leadership at the center and that he wanted Francis J. West, then assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, installed as the new president. Sproull asked for a meeting with Lehman to discuss the matter. (West resigned from the Pentagon on 1 April.)

At that meeting, which took place on 17 December, Lehman repeated that he wanted Kassing removed and West appointed. According to Sproull and Hess, who attended the meeting, Lehman said he was not unhappy with the center's work, but wanted a closer relationship between the center and the Navy. Sproull told Lehman that the University would contemplate a change at the head of the center only if the Navy wanted a different kind of operation that required a different kind of director. In that case, said Sproull, the center's board of overseers (which has six members from the university and is independent of the Navy) would conduct a search and West would be welcome to apply. Sproull says Lehman was unhappy. "It was clear that we were supposed to go down and meet Mr. West and hire him on the spot," says Sproull.

Sproull called a meeting of the board of overseers on 29 December. The board gave Kassing a vote of confidence, and backed Sproull's position that a change of leadership could only be contemplated if the center's mission were to be altered substantially. Sproull notified Lehman.

Back came a letter on 19 January from Vice Admiral Carl

Trost, director of the Office of Navy Program Planning, with proposed changes in the center's operating contract. Trost claimed that the changes would provide the basis for launching a national search for a new president.

Sproull says that the proposed changes were "extremely minor," and would not alter the center's role and mission. There was, however, one "real clincher." The existing contract states that the head of the center will be selected by the contractor with the approval of the Navy; the proposed contract would have the president selected by the Navy with the approval of the contractor. Not only did Lehman want his own man in the post now, but he wanted the right to name a new president at any time.

The board of overseers met early in February and agreed to all Trost's proposed changes except the one concerning the appointment of the president. On 4 March, Trost informed Sproull by telephone that unless the university agreed to change the clause and name West as head of the center, its contract would not be renewed. It is due to expire on 30 September. It would be a significant loss, for the contract specifies that 5 percent of the center's budget be used to support defense-related research at Rochester.

The university has yet to be notified in writing of the Navy's demands, but Sproull has written to Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Thayer that Rochester would not be willing to continue as contractor under the conditions laid down by Trost. Several New York congressmen have also written to Thayer protesting Lehman's actions.

Asked whether the center may have fallen foul of Lehman because it has been critical of his ambitious plans for a 600-ship Navy, Kassing, the center's current head, said "That would not be an apt characterization of our work. We have not been unduly critical."

An article in the *National Journal*, which provided the first detailed public account of the dispute, suggests that the Navy may be irritated because the center hired two former Carter Administration defense officials. Kassing says he has heard some scuttlebutt to that effect, and has pointed out to people on several occasions that the center hires people on the basis of their analytical skills, not their political affiliations.

Lehman, Trost, and Paisley could not be reached for comment. Calls were referred to a Navy spokesman who read a prepared statement claiming that a Navy study had been "critical of the performance" of the center. The implication is that this study is the basis of the dispute over the directorship. Kassing and Sproull say that they have not been given copies of this study, but believe the spokesman was referring to a report on several Navy research centers prepared by Vice Admiral J. Sagerholm. Kassing says copies of the Sagerholm report have "trickled in" to his office; it suggests some relatively minor changes in institutional arrangements that "I would not disagree with," he says.

The Navy spokesman says that discussions are now taking place with organizations other than Rochester that have expressed an interest in operating the center. Presumably, the Navy is hoping that, in these tight financial times, a university will be willing to compromise some independence for a \$19-million contract.—COLIN NORMAN