

Fletcher Promises Rebirth of Shuttle Program

The top priority of James C. Fletcher, the Reagan Administration's choice for administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), will be to restore the "confidence, purpose, and momentum" of the shuttle program, he said on 23 April. Appearing at a hearing of the Senate subcommittee on science, technology, and space, Fletcher called for "a recommitment to the vision of American leadership in space."

Fletcher, who was introduced by two enthusiastic senator-astronauts, John Glenn (D-OH) and Jake Garn (R-UT), appeared headed for swift confirmation by the committee on 30 April after *Science* went to press. He received only a few sharp questions at the hearing about his previous stint as NASA administrator from 1971 to 1977, when he promoted the shuttle as a cheap and efficient means of gaining routine access to space.

Fletcher, 66, acknowledged that his estimates of shuttle costs were too low, and that its performance had apparently fallen short of expectations. But he declined to provide any detailed explanation of the discrepancies, other than to say that "something happened on the way to the bank," that "even now, the shuttle is still on the learning curve," and that "[only] time will tell" if he was really wrong.

Fletcher also said that he did not remember allegations by the General Accounting Office of mismanagement and agency deception during his previous tenure, recounted on 23 April by the *New York Times*. "I am not sure they are talking about the same agency that I used to be administrator of," he said. "I am still under the impression that NASA is one of the best agencies of the federal government."

Although Senators Albert Gore (D-TN) and Donald Riegle (D-MI) expressed some concern about this record, the prevailing sentiment at the hearing was clearly that NASA has been without an administrator for too long, and that only Fletcher could successfully resuscitate the flagging morale of its beleaguered employees. (Fletcher will replace James Beggs, who resigned last January after being indicted for allegedly mishandling federal contracts while he was at the General Dynamics Corporation.)

On most substantive issues, Fletcher chose to punt, explaining that he needed to look into matters more closely once the confirmation was behind him. Thus, he declined to comment on the need for per-

sonnel changes and bureaucratic restructuring, and on the appropriate mix of future launch vehicles. He did endorse the construction of a new orbiter to replace the Challenger, destroyed in an accident on 28 January. And he also indicated in a written statement that the agency would "attempt to maintain a vigorous level of activity" in space science, although it would probably be unable to initiate any new programs for some time.

Fletcher's work at the agency will be complicated by his recent ties to corporations that serve as major NASA contractors. In particular, he has been a director of Fairchild Industries, the Burroughs Corporation, Amoco Corporation, and Comarco,



James Fletcher predicts no new science programs at NASA for some time.

Inc., as well as an employee of Aerojet General and a consultant to LTV, Inc. Perhaps more important, he has been a director of Astrotech International and a vice chairman of its subsidiary, the General Space Corporation, which have been lobbying aggressively for the right to finance a new shuttle orbiter and then lease it back to the agency at a profit.

Fletcher, who is a multimillionaire, told the Senate subcommittee that he would resign the directorships, sell much of his extensive stock holdings, and excuse himself from decision-making on "matters pertaining" to the companies, including Astrotech and General Space. But it remained unclear at the close of the hearing how he could divorce himself from such a fundamental matter as the financing of a new shuttle orbiter, and still effectively direct the rebirth of the space program. ■

R. JEFFREY SMITH

White House Group Recommends a New Shuttle Orbiter

After months of tense negotiation, a White House interagency council has agreed to recommend to the President that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) be allowed to build a replacement for the space shuttle Challenger, which was destroyed in an explosion on 28 January. However, no agreement was forthcoming on how to pay for it.

The Senior Interagency Group on Space (SIG-Space), which reports to the National Security Council, consists of representatives from NASA, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the departments of Commerce, Defense, and Transportation, and several other agencies involved in space affairs. As a purely advisory body it has no formal power; however, as the only forum in which all the interested parties can have their say, it has effectively been delegated the task of deciding on the Administration's response to the Challenger disaster.

The group's decision to recommend building a new shuttle orbiter is thus a victory for NASA, which has lobbied hard for it. However, the agency has had less success with its contention that the \$2.4-billion cost of the orbiter should be paid for with new money in addition to existing budgets. While no final decision has been reached, a number of representatives have insisted that the funds must come out of savings in other programs. An ad hoc subpanel headed by the OMB has been formed to look into financial options.

At the same meeting, SIG-Space also agreed to split off the contentious question of the shuttle's commercial payloads and send it to a separate body, the Commercial Space Working Group, which reports to the Economic Policy Council. NASA would prefer to continue flying at least those commercial satellites it has already committed to. The Transportation department wants to move as many of those payloads as possible onto conventional rockets in order to promote a private launch vehicle industry. Defense department officials support that move: otherwise, when the shuttles start flying again, their growing backlog of national security payloads will force them into the politically embarrassing act of bumping some commercial satellites.

The indications are that no final decisions on space policy will be made by President Reagan until after the Tokyo Economic Summit in May—if then. Meanwhile, the Congressional space committees are getting impatient with all the bickering and delay.