

Fredrickson's Bitter End at Hughes

Donald Fredrickson's forced resignation from the Hughes Medical Institute is seen as tragic

IN the early evening of Tuesday 2 June, Donald S. Fredrickson resigned as president, chief executive officer, and trustee of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. Fredrickson's resignation came at the end of a long day of legal wrangling over the terms of his leave-taking, the culmination of an intensive inquiry into his management of Hughes' headquarters in suburban Bethesda, Maryland, and in particular, of the role played by his wife, Henrietta, who operated as his alter ego in the creation of an identity for HHMI.

That the Hughes' board of trustees announced Fredrickson's resignation without even a pro forma expression of regret is evidence of the bitterness of his departure from the institute which he has led since 1984 (*Science*, 5 June, p. 1181).

The years of Fredrickson's reign were good years for the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, highlighted by the sale of Hughes Aircraft to General Motors for more than \$5 billion (*Science*, 7 June 1985, p. 1178) and the favorable resolution of a decades old battle with the IRS (*Science*, 13 March, p. 1318). These were the years during which Fredrickson charted a scientific course for HHMI's expanding research program—one that has the potential for affecting the course of biomedical research worldwide. These were the years Fredrickson placed his own elegant stamp on the style of the place, intimately joined with that of his wife, whose significant role in activities at Hughes' headquarters led to his fall from grace with the trustees.

Throughout the biomedical community there is a sense that Fredrickson's forced resignation from HHMI is both a personal tragedy and a public loss. How could it have happened?

It is a long and complex story; all the details may never be told. That, certainly, is what the Hughes board wishes. The trustees will not talk about their reasons for demanding the resignation—at least not on the record, their decision to keep silent based on a desire to "protect Dr. Fredrickson's reputation." The fact that the story necessarily includes Mrs. Fredrickson's place in the institute makes it all the more sensitive. Nevertheless, it is possible to put together a

story of what happened that yields some insight.

On the morning after his resignation, in a long conversation with *Science* at his home in Bethesda, Fredrickson himself told the tale as he sees it. Weary from a long and "brutal" investigation by Hughes' lawyers into his affairs, he said, "I'm not devastated, I'm really quite relieved to have it over." But relief at being out of Hughes was mixed with "anger" at the investigation which, in the end, probed questions including whether Mrs. Fredrickson had taken money from vendors for Hughes. "Of course, they didn't



Donald Fredrickson out as president of Hughes.

find anything. But you can't imagine what it's been like," he said. "It took me a long time to get a lawyer. I thought innocence was its own defense." Others attribute the delay to his failure to appreciate the magnitude of the problem, which took shape at the beginning of the year when the trustees demanded an end to Mrs. Fredrickson's involvement in the institute. About 2 months ago, the Fredricksons retained law-

yer and arms control negotiator Paul Warnke and Fredrickson took a leave of absence.

Fredrickson became president of HHMI in the summer of 1984, shortly after a court in Delaware issued a ruling that ended a fight over ownership of Hughes Aircraft. Howard Hughes died in 1976, apparently without an authentic will; none has ever been found. His heirs claimed that Hughes Aircraft belonged to Hughes' estate. The institute claimed Hughes Aircraft for itself, arguing that Hughes had given the institute sole ownership of the company back in 1953 when HHMI was created.

In 1984 the court in Delaware, where both Hughes Aircraft and HHMI were chartered, ruled that the institute did, indeed, own the giant aircraft company. The court also made provisions for the institute's future management. Eight trustees were to be named to lifetime appointments—four selected by the court, four by the institute. The new board would then name a ninth member. Fredrickson was one of the institute's four, chosen by HHMI chairman George W. Thorn, professor emeritus at Harvard and Fredrickson's mentor. It was Thorn who then urged Fredrickson for the presidency, and Thorn who last week presided at his departure. (Had Fredrickson not agreed to resign as a trustee, HHMI's only recourse would have been to go back to the Delaware court.)

In his conversation with *Science*, Fredrickson recalled a series of things that led to tension between him and the trustees, a group comprised largely of persons with experience in business, including Irving Shapiro, former chairman of DuPont, and Helen Copley of the Copley newspaper empire. Hanna Gray, president of the University of Chicago, is the only academician. (The trustees receive, and generally accept, advice on scientific programs from the medical advisory board, which is headed by Lloyd Smith of the University of California at San Francisco, and includes several luminaries of biomedical science. The medical board was not involved in the investigation.)

Says Fredrickson, "I didn't fully appreciate the tensions with the trustees at the time, but I see they were there." Nor did he see that his wife was a focus of those tensions.

HHMI's closeness to NIH was an issue, he thinks—both its closeness in approach to research and in geographical proximity. HHMI headquarters are within a few miles of the NIH campus.

Some strains arose from his efforts to persuade the trustees, Hughes' lawyers, and the IRS that the legal definition of a medical research organization, which contains a provision linking research to hospitals, could be stretched to include HHMI units at places like MIT and Caltech, Fredrickson recalled. But there are continuing efforts to find ways to extend Hughes' reach into institutions that do not include a hospital.

His decision to fire some longtime Howard Hughes investigators at HHMI institutes at Harvard and Vanderbilt also created opposition. "He wanted to decapitate anyone in research who wasn't cloning," said one person close to HHMI, who reported some feeling that Fredrickson was taking the institute too narrowly into molecular biology alone. On the other hand, Fredrickson enjoyed considerable support from the trustees and medical advisers for his view that HHMI scholars must be on the "cutting edge" of science.

And, Fredrickson observed, there were his published reports to the trustees, white papers on various issues that have served as HHMI's only presentation of itself to the public. Each is written with Fredrickson's characteristic flourish, plainly reflecting the man, not the corporate order. Gradually, Fredrickson was becoming the personal embodiment of the institute. "My reports," he says, "galled some people."

With this as background, Fredrickson concludes that the focus on his wife's activities was a "smoke screen. It took me a long time to realize that Madame [Mrs. Fredrickson] was a lightning rod."

Off the record, HHMI officials say that is not so. "This was not a dispute about academic issues, not just differences of opinion," said one. "The tragedy is that Don doesn't see the seriousness" of the tensions caused by his wife's involvement in the institute's affairs, said another.

When Fredrickson became president of Hughes there was a lot to be done. The institute was in a position to increase its funding of research substantially. The question of what to do with Hughes Aircraft had to be resolved, as did the dispute with the IRS. Professional staff in science, business, and law had to be brought on board. Large sums of money had to be dispersed and, to that end, Hughes' strained relations with some of the nation's leading medical schools had to be smoothed over. At Yale, ill feelings about Hughes' presence were particularly deep and Fredrickson made a sustained

and successful effort to convince Yale that there was a new Hughes aborning—a Hughes that would be open, not secretive, a dependable partner in research. Yale agreed to accept \$30 million for a center for molecular medicine.

While Fredrickson concentrated on issues such as these, Mrs. Fredrickson stepped into a void and assumed a role in such matters as establishing and furnishing Hughes' offices, and retaining support staff, including secretaries and cooks. She saw to the amenities, and volunteered to oversee the renovation and decoration of the Cloisters, the old convent on NIH grounds that houses the joint HHMI-NIH program to bring medical students to NIH for a year's experience in the laboratory. She and Fredrickson began to work together as a team, two people handling different aspects of one job, aspiring to the same vision of what the Hughes Institute's style should be.

Henrietta Fredrickson is a handsome woman of Dutch birth who is devoted to her husband and his career. She values a certain formality that was part of her upbringing as the daughter of a university professor. She is well known among Fredrickson's colleagues for her enthusiasm for serving luncheon or tea to guests in his office, at times in the middle of meetings. Her fondness for oriental rugs is shared by her husband, whose hallmark is an office where fine orientals are displayed on top of conference and coffee tables.

Mrs. Fredrickson brought her taste and passion for detail to her informal but influ-

ential role at the institute. As things progressed, her hand reportedly was evident not only in selecting furnishings to reflect the Fredrickson style, but also in the hiring and firing of staff and contractors. (Hughes' headquarters, which occupy two large floors of a nondescript new building in a suburban office park, is furnished with decent quality reproduction 19th-century desks and chairs that Fredrickson accurately describes as "good mediocre.") Hughes' attorneys, anxious to have the institute behave as a public organization even though it is legally private, are said to have expressed concern that purchasing for headquarters was not always done on a competitive basis.

One HHMI official told *Science* that Mrs. Fredrickson's involvement in institute affairs was so pervasive that it "made people fearful of their jobs." In fact, she has been publicly linked to the abrupt firing of Belle Ceja, who worked for Fredrickson when he was director of the National Institutes of Health. After years at NIH, she left the government in order to accept a position as Fredrickson's assistant at Hughes. Fredrickson told *Science* the responsibility for her ouster is his. Ceja declines to comment. But the impression remains that his wife's views were influential in this and other personnel decisions at the institute.

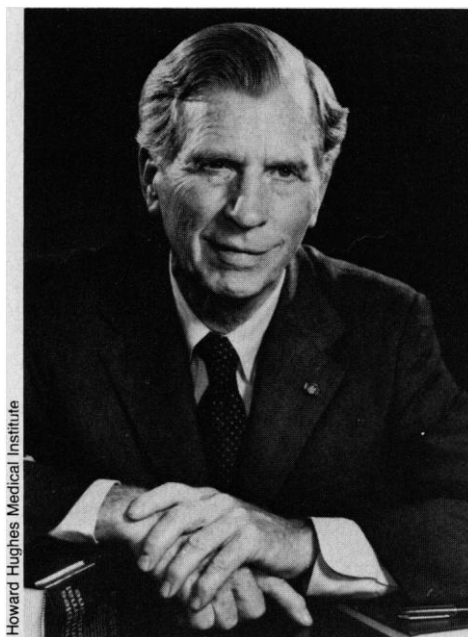
Mrs. Fredrickson's hand in HHMI business was part of an investigation by the institute's general counsel who questioned the staff about how "intrusive" she was in day-to-day affairs. She was subsequently asked to stay off Hughes' property.

In the end, reconciliation between Fredrickson and the other trustees was not possible.

Fredrickson, for his part, is trying to put his resignation in a favorable light, calling it an opportunity to return to academe. He hopes to be able to "put on a white coat and go back to the lab," at first as a guest worker at NIH, where he was director from 1975 to 1981, and where he spent the majority of his scientific career in the heart institute.

At Hughes, the trustees have set about the search for a successor. The search committee will consist of Thorn, chairman of the board and interim president, and two trustees—Irving Shapiro and Hanna Gray. After a national search (no timetable has been set), they will present their candidate to the full Hughes board. HHMI will spend in excess of \$250 million as part of its mainline research enterprise next year, and another \$50 million on its new grants program (*Science*, 10 April, p. 141). Whomever the board picks as Fredrickson's successor will step into one of the most powerful positions in American science. ■

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George Thorn, chairman of the Hughes board and Fredrickson's mentor, presided at his departure.