

Top Talent Leaving NASA . . .

The stars are dropping from the firmament at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), knocked loose by a new ethics code and a strict limit on federal pay. At last count, seven high-ranked officials have departed this year to avoid getting entangled in a law that was meant to stop the "revolving door" between the federal bureaucracy and companies that seek federal contracts. The law applies government-wide, but the pre-deadline exodus has been most visible at NASA.

One stellar example of the talent NASA is losing is William Ballhaus, Jr., who at age 38 became director of NASA's Ames Research Center in Mountain View, California. He is an honors graduate of the University of California at Berkeley with a Ph.D. in engineering (1971), an award-winning researcher in fluid dynamics, and former president of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics. Ballhaus quit the government on 15 July, 18 years after joining NASA and one day before the new law was to take effect. He has not lined up a new job as yet.

"I have two kids in college and two in high school," says Ballhaus. "When I came to headquarters for 14 months [to serve as acting associate administrator for aeronautics and space technology, 1988–1989], my wife gave up her job" and now is unemployed. He finds that "government service is no longer an option for me."

The revolving door rules did not drive Ballhaus to quit, but they did affect his timing. Attorneys told him the wording is vague, allowing broad latitude in interpretation. This always leads to a test in court, a disaster for the person who serves as the test case. Ballhaus believes "you don't have to be guilty to be punished." A person may spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on legal fees, win the case, and still lose credibility.

No one knows this better than James Beggs. NASA is still haunted by the case of its former chief, who was charged with violating procurement regulations while at the Department of Defense. He later succeeded in getting the case dismissed when it became clear that prosecutors had mislaid documents that could have exonerated him. Ballhaus says, "I don't want to be a test case."

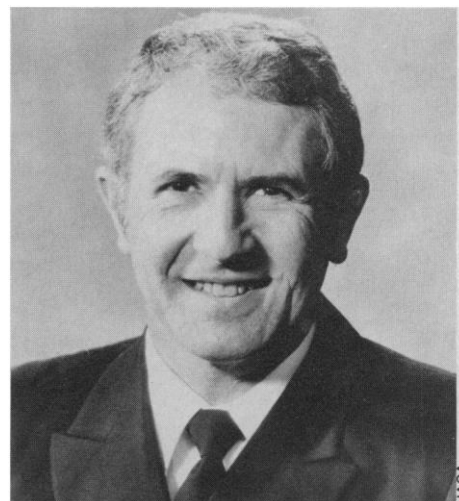
The revolving door rules are part of a new law (PL 100–679) that passed Congress in 1988. It was designed to stop subtle forms of bribery, such as job offers, and prevent federal employees from leaking confidential procurement information to contractors. The regulations were spelled out in detail in

the *Federal Register* (11 May 1989, p. 20488). They require government officials and contractors who negotiate with them to file numerous certificates attesting to their honesty in each contract negotiation, and they forbid officials involved in procurement decisions from taking a job immediately with companies affected by their decisions. Varying delays are imposed, depending on the degree of personal involvement.

Ballhaus says he does not object to the law on principle, but wonders "when do you become involved in a procurement?" The regulations say procurement begins "with the development, preparation, and issuance of a procurement solicitation" and ends "with the award modification or extension of a contract and includes the evaluation of bids or proposals, selection of sources, and conduct of negotiations." People who run federal centers run a fairly big risk, Ballhaus thinks, because they sign hundreds of purchase orders.

At the low-risk end of the spectrum are those who become involved with the government only as part-time technical advisers. They are not likely to be severely affected by the new law, says Edward Loeb, a procurement expert at the General Services Administration. It contains a special exemption for those providing scientific advice—provided it is not used in contract negotiations.

As a rule of thumb, it appears that the higher one's place on the federal executive roster, the more stringent the restrictions. Thus it has been the most senior people at



"A disturbing situation." NASA chief Richard Truly bids farewell to senior officials.

NASA who want out. The list of those departing includes Robert Aller, chief of the office of space operations; Noel Hinners, the chief scientist; John Thomas, director of the shuttle booster redesign program; James Odom, associate administrator for the space station; Thomas Moser, acting associate administrator for the station; and E. Ray Tanner, deputy director of space station operations.

Administrator Richard Truly said at a press conference on 13 July that the regulations have created "a very disturbing situation" for the agency. "It's not the number [of those quitting], but the quality and experience of these people" that troubles him. "When ten senior executive service people leave you, they take with them 250 to 300 years of government leadership and experience." ■ ELIOT MARSHALL

. . . New Recruits Hard to Find

Even as Congress frets over the high cost of housing in space—\$16 billion is the current price tag for the Freedom space station—NASA is worrying about a more down-to-earth housing problem. Potential candidates to manage the space station program are balking at the high cost of living in Washington, D.C. As a result, the agency is having a hard time selling its openings.

"It's mainly a problem of getting very highly specialized, experienced people," says James Sisson, acting director of the space station project office in the Washington suburb of Reston, Virginia. His office is currently trying to recruit a cadre of senior systems integration engineers, with one requirement being extensive experience in aerospace projects. Not surprisingly, most of the qualified candidates are already working in NASA field centers—but in cities

such as Huntsville, Alabama, or Houston, Texas, where housing is comparatively cheap. So when Sisson recently sent out 25 job offers, only two people accepted.

"The others all expressed regret," he says, "but because of housing and taxes, et cetera, they would have taken a \$20,000 hit." Without some special action of Congress, moreover, the government has no legal way to offer a bonus to people who make the move. And the problem will only get worse if and when the space station project gathers momentum. "If we don't have another 60 people in place by the end of the calendar year," says Sisson, "we won't be able to maintain our schedule."

Then again, NASA might find other impediments—budgetary ones, say—to aggressive schedule maintenance.

■ M. MITCHELL WALDROP