

NSF Education Chief Lost in the Shuffle

On the eve of his own departure, NSF director Erich Bloch has replaced the man who has headed science education for 6 years

BASSAM Z. SHAKHASHIRI, the glib chemistry professor who has been education chief at the National Science Foundation since 1984, lost his job last week. His dismissal came suddenly but not as a total surprise, for he had made strong adversaries at NSF over the past 6 years—including his boss, NSF director Erich Bloch.

Shakhashiri presided over a major expansion of NSF's education activities after they had been decimated by the incoming Reagan Administration, an achievement that won him friends in the education community but caused resentment in other parts of the foundation whose budgets were not so favored.

Despite his long reign at NSF, Shakhashiri never adapted to Washington's gray style, but promoted his causes (and himself) with brash enthusiasm—often sporting a lapel button with the motto, "Science is Fun." Now the fun may be over. In a classic government shuffle on 4 June, Bloch reorganized Shakhashiri's job out of existence. Shakhashiri has been offered a post on Bloch's personal staff. Bloch himself is scheduled to leave NSF in August when his 6-year term of office expires.

Officially, Shakhashiri has a new assignment, but he simply says he's been fired. Shakhashiri may be hoping for a last-minute rescue by allies on Capitol Hill, where he has made friends on the education committees. But at the moment, the cavalry is not stirring. Congress may not want to meddle in what is arguably a simple personnel action.

Shakhashiri headed the NSF Directorate for Science and Engineering Education, one of seven major elements of NSF. As of this week, NSF chief Erich Bloch has given the office a new name, the Directorate for Education and Human Resources, shifted a few programs on women and minorities from elsewhere in the agency into it, and appointed a member of his staff—Luther Williams—as its new chief.

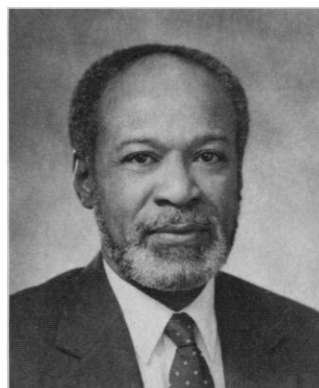
Williams, age 49, is a former president of the historically black University of Atlanta.

He received a Ph.D. in microbial physiology from Purdue University in 1968 and has held teaching or administrative positions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Purdue, Washington University, and the University of Colorado. He has also served in a variety of federal science posts and been responsible for programs that aid disadvantaged students.

Bloch was not available to discuss the



Out: Bassam Shakhashiri



In: Luther Williams

shake-up. But NSF's congressional and public relations chief, Raymond Bye, Jr., said Bloch wanted a change of leadership and hoped to raise the "visibility" of the education office and strengthen its role as a bureaucratic coordinator. It has primary responsibility in the federal government for recruiting young people—particularly women and minorities—into science and engineering. NSF has been criticized on Capitol Hill for not moving fast enough on this kind of recruitment and being slow to collaborate with other agencies.

The question remains: why make the change now? Was it related to Bloch's own impending departure? When questioned, Bye said only that the present was as good a time to install new leaders as any. He said discussions on the 1992 budget are just getting under way and the agency must present its education initiatives to the National Science Board next week. Besides, Bye said, Bloch "is not the kind of person who will [put off] a decision until tomorrow that he can make today."

Yet the reason for the decision is still

murky. Shakhashiri says he was told by Bloch: "You have been here too long. It is time to move on." Indeed, Shakhashiri has been at the agency even longer than Bloch and is the only assistant director not appointed by Bloch.

Internal rivalries at NSF may have played a part in this action. Shakhashiri is not a meek individual, and some of his colleagues have been put off by his aggressive style as well as his great success as a politician. Shakhashiri concedes, "I work in a hostile environment."

More than once, Shakhashiri seemed to be running his own independent agency within NSF. Funding for education is carried as a separate line item in the NSF budget, and congressmen have been known to bypass Bloch in hearings and question Shakhashiri directly about his goals. In 1989, for example, when the funding for the education directorate stood at \$171 million, Shakhashiri responded under questioning by the House appropriations subcommittee that he really wanted \$600 million (*Science*, 20 October 1989, p. 317).

The education directorate's budget has grown dramatically during Shakhashiri's tenure, from around \$55 million in 1985 to an estimated \$251 million in 1991. It has been rebuilt from its near destruction in the early 1980s when then budget director David Stockman took an ax to it. The boom is likely to

continue, too, for every institution that has considered the subject has recommended that the government do more to promote the scientific literacy of U.S. youth. Shakhashiri himself claims that "over 300" reports have come out since 1983 urging the federal government to spend more.

The difficulty for NSF is that heads of the other (basic science) directorates are struggling to stay abreast of inflation, and in the era of Gramm-Rudman-Hollings budget limits, they see big increases in education as coming out of their hides. Shakhashiri dismisses this "zero sum" thinking as timid. He insists that he is not asking for a bigger slice of the NSF pie, but a bigger pie overall. If others want more funds, he suggests, they should follow his example and take their case to the public and to Congress.

Shakhashiri may be down, but not out. "I represent a viewpoint that is gaining momentum," he declares with an edge of ambition in his voice. "I'm in this for the long haul." Yes, he certainly will remain in the game—but the question is: in what position?

■ ELIOT MARSHALL