Briefings

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Housecleaning for NASA?

In the wake of a string of embarrassing fiascoes including a troubled Hubble, a leaky shuttle, and a space station needing drastic redesign, critics of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration are convinced that the agency needs a comprehensive overhaul. The Bush Administration has responded by appointing an "independent commission"—with a NASA-vetted membership—that will assess the space program, NASA management, and new directions for space exploration. Chairing the panel will be Norman Augustine, chairman and chief executive of Martin Marietta Corp., a major NASA contractor.

Will yet another space commission break new ground? Skeptics worry about the objectivity of those chosen for the panel—11 familiar figures from government, business, and academia who could easily have been picked for their predictability. Speaking of the chairman's possible conflict of interest, Senator Albert Gore, Jr. (D–TN), said: "The American people may find it difficult to accept [the panel's] advice uncritically because it comes from someone whose company manufactures the external tank for the shuttle."

But one panel member who asked not to be identified said that while he initially shared Gore's concerns, contact with Augustine had convinced him that the chairman is "a man of high integrity." And a space policy expert, who also requested anonymity, said: "There's nothing like a blast from a senator to clear the air. It might be what was needed to put Augustine on notice that if the report is a powder puff, heads are going to roll."

Potential Nobel Competitor

Eagle-eyed readers may have noticed a full-page advertisement in *Science* at the end of June calling for nominations for a new million-Swiss-franc biomedical prize, the Helmut Horten Research Award. The international award, worth about $710,000, "intends to honor achievements and to encourage further research in the field of medicine or biology of benefit to human health," the ad announced.

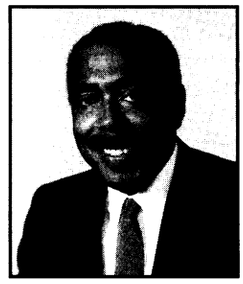
What's this all about? The Helmut Horten Foundation, which until the death of its founder in 1987 did little more than support local doctors and research in the Swiss canton of Ticino, has gone global. Its board of directors has decided to expand its influence by creating major research awards which may rival the Nobel Prizes, if not in prestige, then at least in the size of the cash award.

Officially, the foundation won't admit to schemes for second-guessing the Nobel committees. Max Birnsteil, director of the Institute for Molecular Pathology in Vienna and a member of the foundation's advisory board, says that's not his plan, although "there obviously will be overlap, because we are looking for people of that stature." But foundation director Georg Lerch does seem attracted to the idea of trying to beat the Nobels at the talent-spotting game. "We don't have the expertise yet," he says. "We have to see."

There's further circumstantial evidence that the foundation's directors might have Nobel-scooping on their minds: the first Horten award will be announced on 11 October 1991, a matter of days before the 1991 Nobel Prizes are due to be awarded.

Culture Clash Over Next NSF Head?

An announcement on a new director for the National Science Foundation is expected any day,



Walter E. Massey

say top Administration officials—and the unofficial word is that physicist Walter E. Massey, former Argonne National Lab director, is the candidate. Massey is reportedly the choice of the President's science adviser, physicist D. Allan Bromley, to replace Erich Bloch who leaves at the end of August.

Some insiders became concerned when an announcement failed to materialize as expected on 3 August. It was rumored that Massey's candidacy had been blocked—or at least stalled—by Bush's chief of staff John Sununu, who was said to be supporting a fellow engineer for the post.

White House personnel director Chase Untermeyer would say only that a nomination was likely before the Senate returns from its summer recess. Massey, now vice president for research for the University of Illinois, denied any knowledge of his candidacy and left last week for a sabbatical in Europe.

Report Worries That Sun is Setting on British Research

Britain is not only failing to keep up with its European and Japanese trading partners in inventiveness, it can't even compete with its former self. A recent British government report* says, for example, that while Japanese companies now register 11 times as many patents as they did 20 years ago, British industry is applying for fewer.

The report adds that there is a "statistically significant relationship" between a country's inventiveness—in this case, measured in patents filed in the United States—and its investment in industrial research and development.

Since there has been a 10% drop, in real terms, in British government funding of research and development from 1983 to 1988 running concurrently with the dip in patent filings, this should represent particularly bad news to British policymakers.

They tried to shift the government-industry ratios of basic and applied research funding by cutting government funding of industrial R&D, which has dropped from 34% to 17% since 1983. The idea was to get the government out of "near market" research so it could concentrate on basic science. Industry, however, has not taken up the applied research slack, and government funding for basic research has continued to decline, from £2.5 billion in 1988 to £2.2 billion in 1992.

The government says it has increased what it calls the "science base"—research funded through the universities, polytechnics, and research councils. But the science base increased by only £13 million last year, while non-military government-funded research fell by £154 million.

U.S. PATENTS PER MILLION POPULATION:

	1963-68	1974-78	1984-88
U.K.	44.37	52.04	44.06
Japan	10.40	56.62	114.62
W. Ger.	55.31	96.56	113.90

GROSS DOMESTIC EXPENDITURE ON R&D AS A % OF GDP:

	1983	1988
U.K.	2.3	2.2
Japan	2.4	2.7* (1987)
W. Ger.	2.5	2.8

**Annual Review of Government Funded R&D 1990*, published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office.