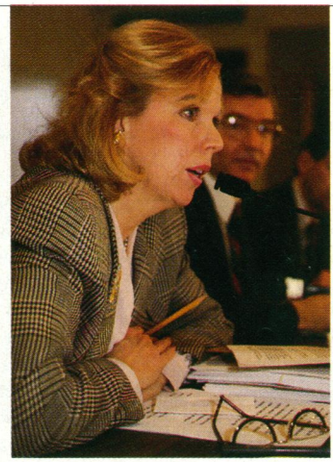
edited by RICHARD STONE

Transition Chaos at Science Agencies

As *Science* went to press, a last-minute battle between the incoming and outgoing presidential administrations had thrown the federal science agencies into a state of pandemonium, with agency heads scrambling to find out if their jobs would survive the inauguration.

The trouble started when the White House issued a surprise notice giving all top presidential appointees less than a week to clear out their desks—whether or not Bill Clinton wanted them to stay. In the one-paragraph memo, the Bush White House accepted the resignations of most top presidential appointees, effective 20 January. That move, reportedly a reflection of deteriorating relations between the two transition teams, turned a leisurely changing of the guard into a lifeboat drill:



RICK KOZAK

Should I stay or should I go? David Kessler, FDA commissioner, and NIH Director Bernadine Healy.

Stunned agency officials started placing frantic calls to the Clinton team to try to save their posts, at least until Clinton could name their successors.

Officials at top science posts (many of which are considered nonpolitical and not necessarily subject to automatic turnover with a new administration) are among those appointees making last-minute attempts to hang on. Officials at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration say that their administrator, Daniel Goldin, expects to take advantage of a clause in the White House order that allows each agency to keep one Senate-confirmed appointee to run the shop until a replacement is named. And while National Institutes of Health Director Bernadine Healy had ordered her office packed up, officials there say that she, too, is hoping for a similar reprieve. Meanwhile, officials at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) refused to speculate on FDA commissioner David Kessler's future.

Ironically, National Science Foundation (NSF) director Walter Massey, who has been shielded from much of the tumult thanks to his special 6-year term, may actually be among the first to leave. NSF officials confirm that he is considering a top job with the University of California, and a Clinton aide predicts an announcement from Massey within a month.

Bush to Order Creation of Biodiversity Center

After declining to sign the biodiversity treaty at the Earth Summit in Brazil last June, President George Bush offered environmentalists an olive branch: He promised to create a national center for biodiversity studies. Now, the rhetoric is about to become reality. As one of his last presidential actions, Bush earlier this week was expected to sign an order that calls for the center's establishment.

The center would assemble information on animal and plant diversity in the United States, and serve in a United Nations worldwide monitoring program. It would be housed at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., rather than at a federal line agency in order to "try to keep science separate from policy," says Thomas E. Lovejoy, a prominent biologist and the Smithsonian's secretary for external affairs.

The order would follow a flurry of environmental actions by federal agencies last week, including decisions to limit logging in the Pacific Northwest to protect the endangered spotted owl; to lift a requirement that companies obtain permits for small-scale tests of genetically engineered pesticides; and to transfer federal land to the state of California for use as a nuclear waste dump.

The promise of a biodiversity center had languished for months because the Department of the Interior and other agencies opposed it. In the end, says a federal scientist close to the negotiations, the Office of Management and Budget—spying a chance for Bush to burnish his environmental record—overrode Interior's objections.

Because the president lacks direct authority over the Smithsonian, the decree would order several other federal entities to help the Smithsonian set up a board of advisers that will write an operating plan, including cost estimates, for the center. Lovejoy, who officials say is likely to head the board, predicts the center will be up and running by early next year.

It's Official: SSC Is a U.S. Baby

Remember all those foreign contributions to the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC) that always seemed just a diplomatic nod away? That, at least, is the way the Department of Energy (DOE) portrayed the project over the past few years, as DOE officials returned from one overseas trip after another with nothing but encouraging signals to report. Now it turns out that the prospect of winning substantial foreign contributions to the $8.3 billion project isn't so hot—and probably never was.

Last week, DOE Secretary James Watkins officially confirmed what many researchers have suspected: The United States will have to build the SSC without much help from abroad. In a letter responding to questions from Representative George Brown (D–CA), the chairman of the House Science Committee, Watkins said that DOE thinks it can get just $400 million worth of aid for the SSC from foreign countries by 1999—primarily in the form of labor and materials from Russia, China, and India. That's less than one-quarter of the $1.7 billion that Congress has stipulated DOE must get from foreign sources. And it's even less than the commitment of $650 million in foreign contributions over the next 3 years that DOE must have by 1 June, if it is not to lose the rest of its 1993 funding.

But rather than kill the project, Watkins wants Congress to change the rules. "We should not be in the position of allowing another nation to determine the [SSC's] schedule," he wrote. Build it like a ship, the former Navy admiral suggested: Give DOE full funding up front. "I recognize that this is a major change that demands serious discussion," Watkins conceded. "However, the approach would substantially improve our ability to successfully compete this project...."

Brown had not responded as *Science* went to press. But one of his questions may give a clue to the thinking on Capitol Hill. "What are the implications...for termination of the project?" he asked. Watkins' answer: an estimated $278 million in shutdown costs, and "a negative message to the [world] about our commitment to science and technology."