

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Livermore Lab Chief Nuckolls Resigns Under Pressure

The spin doctors were already hard at work within hours of the decision by John Nuckolls to give up the fight. Officially, the nuclear physicist had agreed on 4 April to turn Lawrence Livermore National Lab over to an acting director on 1 May. *Science* has learned that this will likely be deputy director Bruce Tarter. Nuckolls will become Associate Director at Large, a traditional slot for retiring lab chiefs that allows them to pursue activities of mutual interest to the lab and themselves. This should leave him well placed to focus on his chief concern: efforts to reduce the nation's vulnerability to various highly classified nuclear threats. And that should have made his many supporters happy—but it hasn't. Enter the spin doctors, who are arguing, even as Nuckolls denies it, that he only resigned under intimidation—specifically, to avert a threat to his chief assistants in the lab.

Just 24 hours before the announcement of his decision, Nuckolls was determined to force an unusual special session of the University of California regents to determine his future—even if it ultimately led to his firing and a loss of all salary and benefits. The UC regents became involved because Lawrence Livermore, along with Los Alamos and Lawrence Berkeley Laboratories, is managed by the university on behalf of the lab's clients, principally the Department of Energy and the Department of Defense. Under ordinary circumstances, the regents leave personnel decisions to the UC president. But they became increasingly drawn into an extraordinary test of wills between Nuckolls and UC president Jack Peltason and his new provost, former National Science Foundation director Walter Massey.

Last summer, Nuckolls had reached the end of the normal 5-year term for directors and told Peltason that in view of the major debate just beginning over the future of the weapons labs in a post-Cold War world, he hoped to remain only long enough for a smooth transition to a director who would match the needs of various groups—including Congress and a committee appointed by DOE Secretary Hazel O'Leary—studying what would be needed in the 21st century. Peltason wasn't buying this argument, in part because, as *Science* has learned, Massey claimed to be receiving calls from laboratory staff unhappy with Nuckolls' management style. Massey had found that everyone agreed Nuckolls is a great scientist whose expertise is needed by the nation, but Massey was also hearing

that Nuckolls was extraordinarily indecisive.

When Nuckolls didn't offer to resign with dispatch, Peltason warned him that he was overdue for a 5-year performance review and that this might turn out negatively. Nuckolls has complained to supporters that this was the first of a series of efforts to intimidate him. But to Peltason and Massey, it was merely realistic.

Nevertheless, Nuckolls concurred to a review, a committee* was formed on 10 October 1993; and on 29 January, a report went to the UC president and the chairman of the UC regents—though to no one else. Other regents were shown a paper that claimed to express the review committee's view that Nuckolls should be replaced as soon as possible. But because the paper was clearly not from the report, Nuckolls' supporters—and some regents—suspected that Peltason and Massey were exaggerating or even fabricating the committee's conclusion.

For Nuckolls there were plenty of reasons to wonder how the report could have been so negative: First, many of the lab's management problems, as addressed in harshly critical DOE, Government Accounting Office, and Inspector General's reports issued shortly after he took over the directorship—and therefore detailing problems not of his making—had been successfully addressed. (Indeed, *Science* has obtained an unpublished DOE review that rates the lab as excellent or outstanding in 47 of 63 categories—continuing an upward trend of several years.) Second, Nuckolls correctly believed that high government officials in both DOE and DOD were supportive of his management. And third, he believed that all but one of his senior staff were solidly behind him.

But *Science* has learned that DOE is divided into warring camps with respect to Nuckolls' stewardship, with the Secretary

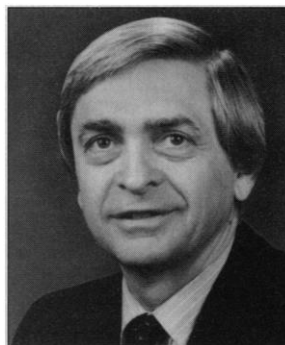
herself ambivalent at best, though trying to remain above the fray. And most devastating to the Nuckolls cause, *Science* has learned from unimpeachable sources that several key staff members, including Tarter, gave negative testimony to the review committee. (Tarter did not return several telephone calls from *Science*.)

Not comprehending that he had so many critics, Nuckolls at first appeared determined to gamble that he might win the backing of the regents, and failing that, that he might at least force a debate at the highest levels of just what kind of managers UC's administrators were and just how critical his counter nuclear terrorism work (and the lab's health, generally) were to the nation. To his supporters the gamble didn't seem a fool's errand. Peltason has been pounded in the San Francisco press for weeks over taped remarks at a private meeting with his chancellors that were published in *The San Francisco Examiner*. Further, the administration's reputation has been wracked for over a year by a series of reports of golden parachutes and generous administrative raises and leaves of absence, all at a time when the state as a whole, and the university itself, have been suffering from a withering economy. In short, it appeared to some that seven of the 16 regents would break ranks with the administration, seek support, and try to oust not Nuckolls but Peltason.

But this scenario won't come to be. According to his backers, Nuckolls was informed late Sunday, 3 April, that if he didn't resign quietly, he might be replaced by an acting director who would fire his favorite senior staffers. Nuckolls himself says that this is totally untrue, arguing that he had "learned a bit of information last week which made my position more flexible. I now expect that we're going to get some information from the Galvin Committee [the one created by Secretary O'Leary] on the laboratory's future missions this fall instead of waiting until next February." His point: it would take that long for a search committee to find a new director anyway and, therefore, it was more likely the choice would match the mission.

Furthermore, Nuckolls told *Science*, it was now clearer, based on "world conditions," that Livermore "will be in the national security business for the foreseeable future...." With these worries removed, he said, it had become easier to focus on two options: serving "until [they] choose a new director" and resigning now. "I guess I come down on the now for several reasons. One is personal. But more than that I think that all this publicity has not been good." A little late, some might argue, for a spin doctor to try that English.

—Ellis Rubinstein



Forced out. John Nuckolls.

*Adm. Richard Truly (Chair), VP, Georgia Tech Research Institute; Lew Allen, retired JPL head; Robert Dynes, UCSD physicist; Kaye Lathrop, SLAC associate director; John McTague, Ford VP for technology; Venky Naraynamurti, UCSB dean of engineering; Herman Postma, Oak Ridge director emeritus.