

BOOK REVIEWS

Achievements of the '60s

Powering Apollo. James E. Webb of NASA. W. HENRY LAMBRIGHT. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, 1995. xiv, 271 pp., illus. \$35.95. New Series in NASA History.

The memory of Apollo tarnishes on the mantlepiece of our national psyche, a neglected trophy of a bygone struggle. Once it seemed that the moon landing would stand out in history as the shining technical achievement of the 20th century, the Columbian voyage on what John Kennedy called "the new ocean" of space. Instead, it looks increasingly like the Viking excursions to North America—remarkable technical achievements signifying nothing, mere footnotes to history.

The reputation of James Webb is hostage to Apollo. He, more than any other single individual, made Apollo happen. As administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration from 1961 to 1968, he shepherded the Apollo program through the assassination of President Kennedy, the quagmire of Vietnam, the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from the moon race, the tragic fire of

1967, and the social and political revolution of the 1960s. His stewardship seemed to be the culmination of a career destined for greatness.

The career that brought James Webb to NASA at a critical juncture in history is well recorded in W. Henry Lambright's spare yet informative biography. Born in Tally Ho, North Carolina, the son of a county school-board superintendent, Webb graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and immediately moved to Washington, DC. In and out of government service for the rest of his life, Webb always seemed to feel most at home in the nation's capital, where he retired with his wife after leaving NASA. Twice he ventured into private business, once with Sperry Gyroscope Company before World War II and once with Republic Supply Company and Kerr-McGee Oil Industries in the 1950s. Outside Washington he made the money that would leave him financially independent.

But it was in Washington that he pursued his great love and his great ambition, to manage public enterprise. He served President Truman as Director of the Bureau of the Budget and as Deputy Secretary of State, getting high marks in the first role and mixed reviews in the second. Still, his reputation as a capable administrator and democratic operator recommended him to Lyndon Johnson and John Kennedy when they had trouble filling the top spot at NASA. Webb accepted the post before he or anyone else knew that the young agency would soon be given an assignment of historic proportions.

Webb was equal to the task. With char-

acteristic energy, enthusiasm, calculation, cunning, and savvy, he set up a management team within NASA to run the program, and he positioned himself to sustain the political support necessary to keep it afloat in the Capital. Both jobs were demanding. They converged when the Apollo 204 fire of February 1967 threatened to split the agency and destroy NASA's political base. Webb salvaged both, but at a high cost in personal prestige and political capital. The following year he uncharacteristically allowed Lyndon Johnson to maneuver him into early retirement. He was not at the helm of NASA to preside over the moon landing that he had brought about.

Webb lived almost a quarter-century beyond the first moon landing, but he never regained the public visibility he had enjoyed at NASA. He preached his gospel of managing large-scale enterprises to all who would listen, but most believed that it was he rather than his system that ran



"Webb as a young pilot in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve poses beside his aircraft during a weekend of active duty in 1933." [From *Powering Apollo*; courtesy of Mrs. James E. Webb]



"Webb stands behind Hugh L. Dryden (left), [NASA] deputy administrator, and powerful Oklahoma senator Robert S. Kerr (right), chair of the Senate Space Committee and a strong Webb supporter, at a press conference following the successful *Mariner 2* space-survey mission to Venus in December 1962." [From *Powering Apollo*; courtesy of NASA]

NASA. Today, when "bureaucrat" has become a pejorative term, James Webb's history is instructive. This consummate bureaucrat managed a team of 400,000 people in one of the great technical achievements of this or any other time. He reached the moon by sheer energy, will, and hard work. He gave to his country better than he got. This fine biography will keep his memory warm until a better day when he and Apollo may look more important than they do now.

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