

Is NASA head Graham out to destroy the Shuttle program?

by Marsha Freeman

At the same time that the nation's space agency, NASA, is trying to recover from the loss of the Space Shuttle Challenger and its crew, and its acting administrator Dr. William Graham has been charged with incompetence and "misleading" a Senate committee, the Congress has had to start the process of making major policy decisions on the future of the U.S. space program.

On Feb. 26, the Space Science and Applications subcommittee of the House Committee on Science and Technology began a set of hearings on how to assure U.S. access to space, taking into consideration the recent loss of one of the four Shuttle orbiters.

NASA had planned to launch 14 Shuttle missions during 1986, and to increase the launch rate to 24 missions per year by 1989. These projections were based on the assumption that there would be a four-orbiter fleet, that the Department of Defense would require about one-third of the Shuttle capacity, and that the other two-thirds of the payloads would be scientific and commercial missions.

Chairman Bill Nelson (D-Fla.), who has flown on the Space Shuttle himself, opened the hearing by stating that the "best thing we could do in memory of the Challenger Seven, is to do what they would want us to do: find the problem, fix it, and move on." He made clear his support for building a replacement orbiter.

In contrast, Rep. Robert Walker (R-Pa.), the ranking minority member of the subcommittee, who gets his advice from the pseudo-conservative Heritage Foundation, opted "de facto" for not replacing the orbiter. He stated that the Gramm-Rudman budget law would put "stringent budget constraints" on NASA. Perhaps we "may find a replacement orbiter from private sources," he stated.

In his testimony, NASA Acting Director William Graham astounded most when he went along with this lunatic program, which would inevitably leave NASA without the necessary funds, and said: "NASA is actively seeking proposals to provide partial commercial support for another orbiter." Graham was forced, under questioning, that this would delay the program still further. He then suggested that NASA just "work closely to integrate the private sector into NASA programs."

When this "sell off the space program to the private sector" proposal was again raised by Rep. Manuel Lujan (R-

N.M.), Undersecretary of the Air Force Edward Aldridge, who also testified, came close to losing his temper. "The issue is bigger" than the budget, he stated. "This is a national emergency. The orbiter should be paid for by the taxpayer," he insisted, as it is a national asset.

Aldridge laid out clearly in his testimony how the current hiatus in Shuttle flights will delay key Defense Department payloads, and why a decision to replace the Challenger should not be delayed.

Chester Lee, who manages the payload manifest for NASA Shuttle flights, also explained that both DOD and space station launch requirements have increased since NASA planned out its 24-launch 1989 schedule. "By 1990, 24 flights per year won't be enough," he stated. "There is already a backlog of secondary payloads."

Graham was attacked by congressmen who are obviously stronger Shuttle supporters than he is. Rep. Torricelli (D-N.J.) who has introduced legislation to provide NASA with a \$400 million supplemental budget increase this year to begin construction of a fourth orbiter, found Graham's lack of enthusiasm for building a replacement orbiter puzzling, and said that he agreed with Aldridge "that we have no choice. This is an emergency supplemental request. We cannot meet our other commitments without a full fleet. National commitments are in real jeopardy."

Rep. Norm Mineta (D-Calif.) was also somewhat incredulous at Graham's written testimony, which stated that the nation needs an "adequately-sized Shuttle" fleet, but did not put NASA on record requesting a new, fourth orbiter. He chided Graham, asking if his written testimony had been cleared by the Office of Management and Budget, while his verbal answers were just "his opinion."

What are the options?

The clearest statement of the options was laid out by Secretary Aldridge. If the orbiter fleet is down for a year, he stated, 10 DOD payloads would be backlogged. Only two of the three remaining orbiters, Discovery and Atlantis, are capable of flying heavier defense payloads.

With a fleet of only three orbiters, the DOD backlog would grow by six per year, in addition to increasing backlogs of civilian missions, Aldridge explained. Though the DOD is implementing a program of reinstating the produc-

tion and use of expendable launch vehicles (ELVs), these unmanned rockets will not be available in quantity for at least two and a half years. They cannot be used for either man-dependent tests for the Strategic Defense Initiative, or extremely heavy military spacecraft.

Aldridge stated that there are three possible approaches that could be taken. In the first, the DOD would exercise its legal right to "bump" all other payloads and use all three orbiters for military missions. He stated categorically that this option would not be in the national interest.

The second option would be to "off-load" the maximum number of DOD payloads to expendable rockets. This would increase launch costs and delays, since each spacecraft would have to be modified. "The obvious choice is to attempt a more balanced approach," he suggested.

"Based on our preliminary assessment, we can remove a few DOD payloads from the STS [Shuttle] manifest in the future to help NASA maintain a viable civil, foreign, and commercial launch capacity and yet fully meet DOD launch demands," he stated. This will require increasing the number and launch rate of the ELVs now planned, and the "DOD would strongly encourage the procurement of a replacement orbiter now to regain the fleet launch capacity."

What went wrong?

by Carol White

By the time that this issue goes to press it is more than likely that William Graham will have been replaced as Acting Director of NASA. We can heartily endorse the remarks of James Fletcher in an interview to the *Houston Post*, where he pointed to Graham's manifest incompetence.

It is impossible to say that the Shuttle accident of the Jan. 28 would not have occurred had James Beggs remained in charge, but it is manifestly the case that with Graham in command, a disaster at some point was a foregone conclusion. Unhappily, James Beggs has now resigned from his post. He has had an outstanding record with NASA, as had the agency before this accident.

Clearly it is overdue that Graham is fired from NASA, but that is not the real point. The question is how he came to occupy a position for which he was obviously unfit. It is well known that his appointment was opposed within NASA over a period of more than six months, and that it was finally forced upon the agency against its best judgement, by members of the White House "palace guard."

It was clear that the man lacked the personal and professional qualities necessary to replace Dr. Hans Mark as second-in-command. What makes the handling of the Graham case doubly suspicious is the fact that only 10 days after he assumed his post as second-in-command, James Beggs came under indictment for what are clearly trumped up charges

having to do with his previous employment in the General Dynamics Convair division.

As of this writing, it is clear that there was knowledgeable opposition to carrying through the flight under conditions of unexpected, extreme cold. Regardless of the failure of this information to reach the top of NASA—a serious breach occurred in NASA procedures, which require that all such objections be reported directly to the top—this does not let Graham off the hook.

The fact is that Graham had gone down to Cape Canaveral on the Saturday preceding the planned Sunday launch, only to postpone that flight over objections. His presence was so abrasive, and confidence in his judgement was so minimal, that rumor had it then that he was mainly concerned about interfering with the Superbowl schedule. After leaving on Saturday, to the best of our information, he no longer concerned himself in the decision making over whether or not to fly the shuttle, despite the fact that weather conditions were deteriorating.

If James Beggs (who was always on-site or represented by his deputy at the final review before each Shuttle launch) had remained in command, there is every likelihood that the accident would not have occurred. He would have had the experience and judgment to reject flying in cold-weather conditions for which Shuttle safety had not been thoroughly tested. He would have had the confidence and moral authority to reject any extraneous public-relations considerations. Furthermore he had the confidence of his staff and associates: Questions would have automatically been referred to him for judgment.

It is well known, that Graham has alienated the people at NASA by his general mismanagement of the agency, combined with his abusive conduct toward the staff. It was generally rumored that he had been brought in to clear out the NASA "old boys." An organization such as NASA is like a military unit. It depends upon the high morale of its troops for that edge in performance which up to now has guaranteed its excellent record.

If the tragic accident of Jan. 28 had not occurred, we can be assured that the substitution of Graham for Beggs, could only have more slowly resulted in the erosion of NASA's performance, particularly as he continued to drive out qualified top staff, such as Begg's assistant Culbertson, whom Graham "relieved of his responsibilities" as general manager in February.

A lot of time is being spent trying to assess the chain of responsibility for the disaster. More to the point would be an investigation of the chain of responsibility, through the White House patronage machine, which forced the placement of William Graham in Hans Mark's job, and then perhaps, was complicit in clearing the way for him to assume James Beggs' responsibilities. Graham bears responsibility in the deaths of the Challenger crew and the destruction of one-fourth of the United States' Shuttle fleet, but the final responsibility lies elsewhere.