

Editorial

The real NASA scandal

Since Robert McNamara's tenure as secretary of defense, the United States defense effort has been consistently sabotaged. The method of cost accounting which he introduced as the criterion for decision making, has penetrated to every department of government. The responsibility for the Jan. 28 Shuttle accident can rightly be laid at his doorstep; and at that of George Shultz who, as head of the Office of Management and the Budget in the Nixon administration, applied these policies to cripple the Shuttle program right at its inception. Notwithstanding, immediate responsibility for the tragedy must be sought elsewhere.

It is curious that the Presidential Commission investigating the Shuttle accident has failed to ask the key question: Why was a manifest incompetent such as William Graham placed in charge of the program? Every decision made by NASA over the past several years is being second-guessed but this one. The media is using all its persuasive power to try to turn the American public against the space program, yet no one asks why Graham was made acting administrator of NASA?

The Shuttle may or may not have had some close shaves on earlier flights, but the fact remains that it had an excellent safety record, until Jan. 28, 1986—two months after Graham assumed responsibility for the agency. This can be attributed to the exceptional quality of leadership offered by James Beggs. Precisely because of the high level of risk involved in flying the Shuttle, his on-the-spot command decisions provided the necessary margin between mission success and tragic failure.

Yet, James Beggs had been forced out of his position by indictment on criminal charges, relating to his tenure as vice-president at General Dynamics Corporation. The case is so flimsy—even were it merely a civil action—as to raise the question of why the Justice Department is pursuing it. Indeed, one special agent of the Justice Department, Gary Black, appears to have been replaced when he recommended against prosecution in early 1985. Surely, a decision as serious as that involved in forcing the head of NASA out of a position

of key importance to national security, would have had to involve Attorney-General Ed Meese.

This makes the replacement of Beggs by Graham particularly significant. His appointment was forced through by White House pressure, over heated opposition from within NASA. For over six months, NASA had been under pressure from the White House to appoint Graham deputy director to fill the vacancy left by Hans Mark, who left the agency to become chancellor of Texas University. A list of more qualified candidates for the job was available, but it was made clear to NASA officials that the White House "palace guard" was insisting on Graham.

Nevertheless, for over six months, they did resist, on grounds that Graham was clearly not qualified to assume even the responsibility of second-in-command, since his past experience had been as a Pentagon consultant on arms-control questions, rather than the space program. Nor did he have experience as a top administrator. Graham was, however, an active member of the California GOP. Was his appointment a matter of political patronage?

A mere 10 days after Graham became deputy director, James Beggs was handed the criminal indictment which forced him to take a leave of absence from NASA. Graham was then made acting director of the agency. From the minute that he stepped into James Beggs' shoes, he made it clear to everyone concerned that he was there to clean out the "old boys." He was so abrasive that it was feared that many of the most qualified top management of the agency would be driven to resign.

If the Shuttle accident 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.

The questions which the Presidential Commission must now ask are: Where was William Graham when the decisions were being made, what was his input into the decision-making process, and who was behind Graham's appointment to the number-two spot at NASA?