

Interview with DR. THOMAS O. PAINE, NASA Administrator, by RS, 1145-1230, 13 May 1969, NASA Hq., Washington.

When I went in to see Paine in his Deputy's office--he moves this week-end into the redecorated Administrator's office--he was at the black-board blocking out a speech he is to give in Miami. Subject: what can NASA, with its techniques and organization, do to solve the problems of the cities. With him was Ed Schmitt, "Paine's intellectual, the man he bounces ideas off," and Paine talked for perhaps ten minutes on the similarities (which outnumbered the former). He didn't sound very enthusiastic about NASA's being able to come to grips with the cities' problems. But he was going ahead with the speech.

How did NASA look to him now? "We have two big jobs," Paine replied, "landing on the moon without a tragedy, and trying to get set for the second decade of space--lunar exploration, keeping the Saturn V going, the space station. (And persuading Nixon to accept it as a national goal). Really, there is a third job, related to the other two: digging the money out of Congress.

"If we are successful with Apollo 10 and 11 we expect a big wave of Congressional support this summer. It seems to me that Congress is going to be very late with its work, and July is a fine time to land on the moon."

I said it must be flattering to NASA, but the loss of some key executives--Jim Beggs to be WHAT, Phill Whittaker to be Asst. Sec. of AF, Harry Finger to be Asst. Sec. of HUD, among others--must create problems.

"Not as much as you would think," said Paine, "Phil Whittaker hadn't been here long, and neither has Jim Beggs. Finger's loss does pose a problem. I talked to Romney about HUD, and told him I'd do anything I could to help him. Giving him Harry was the best thing I could do for him."

Seamans was in NASA, but he had already left when he was appointed Secretary of the Air Force. This prompted the question: "Your relations with DOD seem to be amiable?"

"Up to now, but the honeymoon may end next month. The Manned Orbiting Laboratory is a very active issue at the moment. If Congress forced the AF to eliminate MOL, there would be a good bit of sniping at NASA. Seamans has already told me he would have to oppose me in case of a conflict. I think the AF would be misguided; all they could do would be to take us down with them. But we'll see."

What was the difference, now that he had become Administrator? "There's not a great deal of difference," Paine said, "I don't have Jim Webb to turn to. But even there, Webb had turned over a lot of the job to me before he left. You'll remember he was out of the country when the C-prime decision was being made. The transition has been pretty smooth."

That brought up C-prime again, a subject on which I have talked to Paine three times. "When Sam Phillips and I finished our conversation with Webb in Vienna he had a discussion about where insubordination begins. I remember saying it was a case of Nelson's holding the telescope to his blind eye.

"I felt it was better to preserve the option to fly C-prime lunar orbital. I was protecting the policy decision when all the technical people felt that lunar orbit was better for the whole program.

"If the Soviets flew their lunar orbit or circumlunar flight in January, and we hadn't done anything about ours, Jim Webb would have been attacked for turning down our opportunity. I did it to protect him." Paine realizes that Webb still feels it was a bad decision.

I said, "You did interpret his cable liberally, as you said." He sure did, he averred.

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Paine referred several times to the possibility of a tragedy on Apollo 10 or 11. To my surprise he said he had recommended an astronaut as secretary of the Space Council (I had thought it an aberration of Spiro Agnew's). They had trouble getting an astronaut--I told Agnew there wasn't even any use asking Borman. Lovell turned it down. McDivitt was interested, but he had eighteen years in the Air Force and he would lose all that time if he resigned from the program.

So, Anders is the man. He has only twelve years' time. His appointment was to have been announced at the White House today, but it has been put off until tomorrow or next day (because the Rev. Ralph Abernathy has preempted the time, Frank Borman told me this morning). The story has leaked; it is in Newsweek this week. "I told the White House a couple of weeks ago if they insisted on having the announcement over there--it seems to me they are acting like Lyndon Johnson--they'd better get it over with or it would leak."

And why did Paine want an astronaut in the job? "There are advantages in case there is a tragedy. If the Vice President installed a political friend, it would look bad. I told the VP if he looked into it he would find that it made sense to have an astronaut. That's what happened."

Further on tragedy: "Apollo 10 is much more difficult than 8 was. The time lines are tougher--you remember how tough they were on transferring to the LM on 9. It's a very bust mission. A successful 10 will certainly make the 11 crew more confident. It's very important."

Surprisingly, Paine added, "I'll be satisfied if we land by December."

Was possible tragedy the reason Paine wanted 10 to be an unmanned lander? "I took a stronger position than I really felt. I wanted to make sure they had considered the possibility. The crash of the LLTV brought it to the fore. (George Low notes 446 says re this: "Paine is still interested in pursuing an unmanned LM landing. He apparently believes LLTV accidents are closely related to the lunar landing situation. We should point out that the causes of the accident are in no way connected with a LM landing.")

"The fuel in the LM and LLTV is quite low. If Stafford hovers too long he could run out of fuel. If we could have a soft lander they wouldn't have to land right away. When the astronauts are down to 50,000 feet they still have the option. If 10 goes wrong, we could still do 11 unmanned. But the total system looks good. The need for exercising the crew is the commanding point--the need to run a crew through. If 10 is highly successful we'll land 11."

I mentioned that Hage, in his Apollo 10 briefing for Paine (8 May), was talking about the LET separating from the CM, which is vital. Hage pointed out that there were four bolts attaching the LET and the CM; they had dual electro-explosive devices, dual electric wiring, separate power sources--" so it's completely redundant." What was Paine's reply, which I missed?

"I said it's the old story that in an attempt to add safety devices the net effect becomes a decrease in safety. It's so essential that these redundant things function. It's like the sub rescue buoys in World War II. If you released them you gave away our position."

Or, I suggested, like the armor plating we added and added to the P-39's and P-40's early in the war, so that the planes couldn't fight the Zeroes. Precisely, Paine said. Also, like safety devices that shut down two engines on Apollo 6 and messed up the mission. Or like the circuits. Push button light on. If one circuit lights up, you are okay. But if two of the three light up, you abort. (CHECK THIS.)

"We have a low safety factor, but great management control," said Paine. "We have to live with a low safety margin."

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I asked Paine about the struggle between Public Affairs and the Mission Control people over private conversations between s/c and ground. I noted that George Hage had brought it up at the tail end of the May 8 briefing.

"Actually, Julian Scheer and Sam Phillips had already worked out a satisfactory wording by telephone. Hage shouldn't have brought it up at that meeting," Dr. Paine said.

Well, what were the results?

"We can't have it both ways," said Paine, "you either have an open program, or you give the public selective material. These people of the floor of Mission Control are public figures. They are on TV a lot. They are anxious to look good.

"Once they begin to conceive of themselves as actors, we are in trouble. They shouldn't have to worry about public affairs. We have a professional group of people--Public Affairs officials--to control these things.

"On Apollo 9 there was a tendency toward a lack of openness. It extended to Phillips, because they wanted to go around again (CLARIFY)."

So, there is no change from previous policy? "Right. We've sharpened the language a bit; a new letter is being prepared now. I'll show you a copy. (NOTE). But essentially, no change."

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What about last Friday's (May 9) session with dissident MIT students?

"That's not exactly the right term," said Paine, "There is faculty unrest also. Howard Johnson, the president of MIT had put together a student-faculty panel. Jack Worlina (SP?) of the instrumentation lab said the panel would like to talk to NASA, to the Air Force and to KOMING. After I talked to Jack I got to thinking; I was concerned about a ragtail group coming down, and me sending them on to the others. The discussion would cover the relationship of the university to the government in our times.

"I called Howard Johnson, and asked 'Do you indeed endorse these people?' He said yes, unrest is rampant; please do your best to help.

"I called Foster at the Pentagon (chief of research?), DuBridge and KOMING to try to get an administration position. The four of us sat down. DuBridge had testified the week before that there was no secrecy at Cal-Tech; this was before the Harris Committee. This was cockeyed. He talked about off-campus research. I said I was for on-campus; no Oak Ridges."

I asked how much classified work does NASA have. "About 10% of our contracts carry security classifications," said Paine. Our telemetry applies also to AF fighters, and to cargo transports (CK). The panel will continue hearings, and will make recommendations to Howard Johnson. The future of the Lincoln Lab and Instrumentation Lab depends on the outcome. "Stark Draper of the Instrumentation Lab sees his life work crumbling away," said Paine.

The session was tape recorded, and can be listened to.

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I mentioned that Frank Borman had said this morning that he was going to Czechoslovakia. Why? "For COSPAR," said Paine, "It's a scientific meeting on astronomy. They wanted to see the photography, and who better than Borman to show it to them?"

I said Borman had said Jim Lovell, who has wanted to go to Czech. (His grandmother was born there, or is it his mother?), would be furious. "Lovell can't go," said Paine, "He is on the backup crew of Apollo 11. Jim wants to land on the moon." Would his flight be Apollo 13? He would have to get a replacement for Anders. Paine didn't know.

He did say that Apollo 12 won't go until November (provided 10 and 11 are successful), and 13 next May.

Did Borman's ability to charm Congress have anything to do with his appointment to the Space Station job? No, though he has testified in the past (Apollo 204 fire), and he is a good man at anything. "He worked on the spacecraft, too, after the fire, you know."

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Circumstances of Paine's appointment as administrator: "I was still in the dark until just before the appointment. After a couple of people turned down the job it became increasingly apparent that there wasn't a flow into the administration. Same with a new deputy. There seems to be no tremendous desire to come to Washington. It's a rough time. So they decided to go with what they had.

"NASA is in a highly stressful period. If we are going to have a fiasco, wouldn't it be better to have the old man in, rather than bring in a fresh man." INTERESTING THAT PAINE RETURNED SO MANY TIMES TO THE POSSIBILITY OF DISASTER.

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