

INTERVIEWEE: DR. THOMAS O. PAINE (Tape 1)

INTERVIEWER: T. HARRI BAKER

March 25, 1969

B: Dr. Eugene Emme, the NASA historian, is sitting in.

Dr. Paine, a very brief summary of your career. You were born in California in 1921, received a Bachelor of Engineering from Brown in 1942, served in World War II in submarines in the Pacific, in 1949 got a doctorate in Physical Metallurgy from Stanford, and from 1949 to 1968 worked for General Electric--the last five years as manager of their Tempo--GE's Center for Advanced Studies--in Santa Barbara. Early in 1968, you were appointed Deputy Administrator of NASA. Then [you] became, first, Acting Administrator on Dr. Webb's retirement in October 1968 and, then, Administrator just recently.

To begin, sir, had you had any acquaintance with Mr. Johnson before your appointment in 1968?

P: No, the first time I talked to Lyndon Johnson was in connection with the appointment.

B: Had you formed any opinions of him--for example, his attitude toward science generally and the space program particularly?

P: Yes. I had supported President Johnson in the previous election when he had run against Barry Goldwater, whom I did not regard as a wise man. I had, on my own initiative, formed a chapter of the Scientists and Engineers for Johnson and Humphrey in

Santa Barbara. This was the first political act that I had taken, and I took it because I was concerned about the Goldwater campaign which seemed to me was not proceeding in a prudent direction for the country.

B: Who was your liaison with the national party during the campaign?

P: Well, actually, we dealt with some people out of Los Angeles who had a Southern California chapter of the Scientists and Engineers. I don't recall the fellow's name. It was a very loose arrangement, I assure you. Our activity essentially consisted of getting people who shared our views to contribute some money for a series of newspaper ads.

B: In the California area?

P: In the Santa Barbara area.

B: Then you didn't actually meet Mr. Johnson until your appointment was being considered?

P: That's right.

B: How were you notified that you were under consideration for the appointment as Deputy Administrator?

P: Why, I had a phone call from one of John Macy's assistants one day in California, and he asked whether I would be interested in a job in Washington. I had previously been approached to see whether I would be interested in the job of Assistant Secretary of Transportation for Research and Development, and had gone in and talked to Alan Boyd about it. Although I found Alan Boyd very attractive, it didn't seem

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to me that the job was structured in a way that would give me the ability to do anything. So I declined that, but said at the time that although I was not going to accept, I would not preclude a federal job.

B: Did you specifically mention NASA?

P: No, in fact it was a rather casual comment. I wasn't looking for a federal job. But I had been doing quite a bit of work in my Tempo job with a number of agencies in Washington, so I was reasonably well known, particularly in the military circuit. I had also done a lot of work for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and I guess people had run into me here and there.

B: This later call, then, was specifically about the position with NASA?

P: Yes, and the job that I was approached on at that time was that of Deputy Administrator of NASA. Federal titles being what they are, that sounded to me like some job pretty far down the road. A deputy administrator sounded to me like some sort of administrative assistant. I said I wasn't particularly interested. I had never thought much about the space program. As it happened, I was coming east to Washington the next day anyway, and said I would be glad to stop in for a few minutes. So I did, and found somewhat to my surprise that it was the number two job in the Space Agency.

B: Who explained to you the nature of the job?

P: Well, I went in to see John Macy after I talked to his young assistant for about half an hour. John Macy and I then discussed the job for about, oh, perhaps an hour. I went over there around six o'clock one evening, I believe, and got out around seven or seven-thirty.

B: Did you talk to Mr. Johnson during this process?

P: No, I started out by just talking to Mr. Macy, and he told me about the job and it sounded, well, fascinating. So I said that I would want to discuss this with Mr. Webb, whom I had never met, before I would consider seriously a job that would obviously involve working very closely with Mr. Webb. Mr. Macy pointed out that that actually wasn't necessary, that this was a presidential appointment and that Mr. Webb need not really be consulted. But I said I wouldn't put myself in a number two position like that unless I had a good rapport with the number one man so we could work together as an effective team.

B: And you did discuss it with Mr. Webb?

P: Yes. The appointment was set up the next morning, actually. I was leaving town the next afternoon, so I came over around nine-thirty or ten o'clock, I believe, and talked to Mr. Webb. We spent about an hour and a half, I guess, talking it over. What really happened at that meeting was that we hit it off famously. We liked the same things and disliked the same people--and we just got along very well. So at the end of that time, after the session with John Macy the evening before and the morning session with Jim Webb, I became quite interested in the job.

- B: Was there any hint at the time that Mr. Webb was contemplating retirement soon?
- P: No. He did say that I should consider the fact that he would be leaving one of these days, but I dismissed this as unlikely.
- B: There was no talk that the deputy position just might be just a temporary stepping stone to acting or the administrator position?
- P: No, although there was a little speculation to this effect in the press at that time, but I didn't pay any attention to it at all, making my decision solely on the Deputy position.
- B: So far as you and Mr. Webb discussing it, it was not mentioned?
- P: Well, he may have mentioned something along this line, but I didn't pay any attention to it. Of course, the other thing you have to remember at that time was that it seemed very likely that President Johnson would be re-elected easily in the forthcoming election. This was before the McCarthy binge. It was before the TET offensive in Viet Nam. At the time I talked to them about this job, things were in a pretty static and steady state, and they looked like they would go on that way for a long time. Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King were alive. Student unrest had not really started. It was a very different time, although it was just a year ago that I'm speaking of.
- B: Then did you discuss the job with Mr. Johnson during this process?
- P: Yes, although the way both Mr. Webb and Mr. Macy put it to me

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was that if they took me in to talk to the President and the President offered me the job--which they could not be certain he would do--that they would not want me to turn him down, and that I would therefore have to make a favorable judgment before they arranged for me to see the President. I went back to the coast and thought about it for about a week. Then I telephoned back and said that my first inclination had been to do it and that the more I thought about it, the more I was anxious to do it, and I would welcome an opportunity to talk to Mr. Johnson about it.

B: What did you and he discuss when you met him?

P: Well, I met him at a rather dramatic moment actually. I flew east and had an appointment to see him, I believe, at nine-thirty or so--early in the morning. That turned out to be the morning of the TET offensive and actually at the time I talked to him the Viet Cong were still inside the U. S. Embassy in Saigon. He had had an emergency breakfast meeting with various members of Congress and the Cabinet, I believe. He'd been up a good deal of the night so that when I went in to see him about this job, he was tired and his mind was clearly on other things. It was with some effort that he redirected his thoughts to talk to me about the Space Agency. But his face lit up. He obviously had a great affection for the Space Agency and for Jim Webb, who went in with me. We talked about NASA, and I said I would be most interested in

the job. He leaned back and talked about several things. He talked about the situation the nation was in, and the terrible demands that were being made on the country, this latest military reverse in Viet Nam, the great difficulty that the Administration faced, how much he needed people to come in to the government and shoulder part of this burden and relieve him of it, to serve him loyally, help him to move the country ahead in these very difficult times. Looking back on it, I have often thought he certainly had a very clear vision that morning because times indeed became very troubled after that.

B: Was this a monologue or a discussion?

P: A monologue.

B: Then you were appointed, confirmed, and so on as Deputy Administrator. Then next, when did you first find out that Mr. Webb was contemplating early retirement?

P: Well, this came up very suddenly indeed. Mr. Webb and Mr. Johnson and the Congress, and myself, of course, were all engaged in the question of future funding levels for NASA. We were at that time going through a period during which we had not had any manned space flights for many, many months. The space program was contending with many other activities for national priority. President Johnson was trying to allocate to the best of his ability resources for these many conflicting claims: to his social programs, the war in Viet Nam, fiscal problems, balance of trade, [and] the riots in

the cities, like the one right here in Washington that followed Martin Luther King's assassination.

In the midst of all of this, Mr. Webb was continually stressing his position that we were in danger of losing the great strength that had been built up by the U. S. at such great cost and were in danger of again losing the initiative in space to the Soviets. On September 16th, he went over to the White House to discuss with the President how best to handle the problem of continuity at NASA after the election and a new administration had taken over. By then, of course, President Johnson had decided not to run, Hubert Humphrey had been nominated in Chicago and the campaign was well under way, although it wasn't yet clear just how the election was going to come out. Mr. Webb's forthcoming birthday on October 7th was on his mind I am sure.

I believe that Mr. Webb felt that the best thing for NASA and for himself, too, would be to put himself in the position of clearly resigning before the new Administration came in. This would give him the opportunity to remove NASA somewhat from the political arena, since Jim Webb as the previous political appointee would be out and the job of administrator would be open. It would give whatever administration came in an opportunity very calmly to find the best man for the job without feeling a time pressure to remove Mr. Webb, which would help particularly to assure

continuity in the job--which Mr. Webb was most anxious to do. He also felt that this would give me the best opportunity to remain on as deputy since I would have been in the Deputy job for a little less than a year by the time the new Administration came in and by removing the top man, I would be given an opportunity to show what I could do with the agency.

So he went over to see President Johnson, and the discussions apparently led to an LBJ decision at that time, although, I frankly don't think that Mr. Webb was looking forward to a decision so soon. I think that he and Mr. Johnson probably got somewhat swept away with their discussion and decided: "Well, this sounds like a very sensible thing to do. Let's do it." President Johnson immediately called in the White House press corps, I think, before Mr. Webb had a chance to call his wife or anybody else and the radio report came out right away that he had decided to resign on his birthday. That was Mr. Webb's first report of it, when a friend called and said she'd heard it on the radio. Had

B: Had you been called?

P: No, this was news to me as it was to everyone. He had discussed with me the fact that he was going over to the White House and that he would discuss his resignation. But the general idea had been that this would be sometime much later in the year. But, as I say, the discussions apparently got advanced much more rapidly than planned.

So what happened was that Mr. Johnson made the announcement to the press. Mr. Webb then had a brief impromptu press conference on the White House front steps in which he repeated once again his great fears that the Soviets would be catching up with the United States and restated his view that we should be doing more. He said that his resignation was an attempt to get stability and follow-through in the program--to give NASA the best chance for surviving the change of the administration and coming out with the best new administrator of a non-political type.

In the process of all this, he did manage to get to a White House telephone and call me and say, "Say, Tom, this thing has developed very rapidly. The President has announced this, and the President is going to ask you to be the Acting Administrator." This was the first that I knew of it and he also mentioned at that time: "Gee, I had better call Patsy." But he didn't have a chance to call Patsy, and I understand there was some family trouble after that when some friend called Patsy and told her what she had just heard on the radio about her husband. So that was the way this whole thing looked from my particular vantage point.

B: And that would seem to indicate then that it was just assumed that you would stay on as Acting Administrator rather than as Administrator.

P: Yes.

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B: Until the new administration.

P: Yes. The theory of this was that by making me Acting Administrator, this would leave the job open for filling by the new administration and would put no pressure on them to immediately replace an incumbent but would rather give them the chance to fill an open position in a perhaps more leisurely fashion.

Of course, as far as I was concerned, this thrust a great deal of responsibility on me because we were four days from the launch of the first manned Apollo mission. I believe Mr. Webb retired on the seventh, Gene [Emme], and the first manned Appollo mission took off on the eleventh.

B: I was going to ask if it was a difficult administrative setup for you to be Acting Adminstrator in that kind of hiatus when not only was the Apollo 7 mission immediate, but the planning for the Apollo 8 and the budget planning was all--.

P: Yes, it was quite a challenge and one that I must say I enjoyed very much. Of course, Jim Webb had built up an enormously strong organization here--everything from the NASA historian right on through the other areas--so that I had a great deal of help. But we did have to make some very critical decisions. In fact, in the previous month of August this whole question of the Apollo 8 mission had come up. I had been forced to telephone Jim Webb and George Mueller, the Associate Administrator for Manned Space Flight, and Homer Newell, the Associate Administrator, while the three of them were over in Vienna, and tell them that because of the new

slippage in the schedule of the lunar module it was my conclusion that we had to open the option of a possible lunar orbital flight for Apollo 8.

Well, you can imagine poor Mr. Webb and George Mueller and Homer Newell being over in Vienna attending scientific meetings--their minds very much on their trip and where they were--getting a telephone call across the Atlantic one morning out of the blue announcing something as radical as this. Remember, we'd had a lot of problems on Apollo 6, and weren't even sure we'd fly Apollo 8 manned such less to the moon. Well, the appointment then, in early September, put this entire burden on me--of making this final decision just as I had had to make the initial starts down this road in August.

B: Was there any awkwardness involved in the fact that Mr. Webb was still here and still serving as a part-time consultant?

P: No, none at all. Jim Webb and I have always gotten along just famously from the first instant we met. We have complete trust and confidence in each other. There has been no problem of any kind. He has been a wonderful friend as well as a boss, and then a consultant to help me.

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By Thomas O. Paine

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