

Unanswered Questions on the Apollo Tragedy

By HARRY SCHWARTZ

The more that is revealed about last January's Apollo tragedy, the more curious it becomes. As last week's Congressional hearings indicated, the roots of this catastrophe spread wider than the technical factors that received the initial emphasis.

Any adequate investigation must go beyond the disaster that took the lives of the three astronauts. It must penetrate the politics and economics of the nation's vast space-industrial complex. In the process the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, its management, its policies and its contractors should get more critical Congressional scrutiny than they have received to date.

Blinded by Success

To begin with, though, there is the disaster itself. There has not yet been a full answer to justify permitting the astronauts to enter their death trap. The nearest thing to an explanation so far is the highly unsatisfactory claim that both NASA and the Apollo capsule builder, North American Aviation, were anesthetized by success, so that it never occurred to them that an accident could occur on the ground. Nothing of the sort, after all, had happened during either the Gemini or Mercury programs.

But such carelessness and un-

concern seem incredible. The hazards must have been apparent to those involved in the project. The Apollo capsule tested last January had a pressurized oxygen atmosphere that any spark could have turned into an inferno. It also had much combustible material to serve as fuel. But it had no instant escape hatch or fire-fighting equipment. How could any technician have examined this situation and failed to realize the deadly game it represented here on earth?

The Phillips Report

Once these answers are in hand, a closer study must be made of the so-called Phillips report, which revealed NASA dissatisfaction with North American's performance. It now turns out that in December 1965, NASA's Apollo program director, Maj. Gen. Samuel C. Phillips, sent a highly critical memorandum to North American's president, and about that time considered taking part of the Apollo contract away from the company.

General Phillips said last week that by April 1966, North American had made "sufficient progress" so that, in effect, all was forgiven. But the NASA review board that probed the Apollo fire found "many deficiencies in design and engineering, manufacturing and quality control."

Evidently General Phillips re-

laxed his vigilance too soon. Now the case for publishing his "report" is strong, as is the case for finding out why NASA kept North American's deficiencies secret. Perhaps the nation needs an independent technical auditing agency that would regularly publish findings on the competence or incompetence of major Government technical contractors.

If a year and a half ago, General Phillips was wondering whether North American was qualified to carry out the Apollo contract, should the company have gotten that contract in the first place? Congressional investigators might throw some useful light on that question.

It is worth exploring the granting of the contract for another reason. For there is evidence to suggest that the shadow of Bobby Baker, the former secretary to the Senate's Democrats, darkened the history of North American's relations with NASA.

During the period when NASA was pondering the choice of contractors for the Apollo Project, North American was holding talks that ended in the Serv-U Corporation acquiring the highly profitable contract for vending machines in North American's plants.

Serv-U, of course, was the company owned by Mr. Baker and Fred R. Black Jr., North American's highly paid Wash-

ington lobbyist. They were able to start Serv-U as the result of a loan from a bank that had a close financial relationship with Mr. Baker's good friend, the late Senator Robert S. Kerr, then chairman of the Senate Space Committee and a great booster for Oklahoma's industrial development. And at the head of NASA was—and is—James E. Webb, who also was a close business associate of Senator Kerr before he took his present post.

Choice of Plant Site

Against this background it may not be surprising that after North American got the huge Apollo contract from NASA it picked Tulsa, Okla., as the site for a new plant and did much of its banking with a bank in which Senator Kerr and Mr. Black had substantial amounts of stock.

Every defense contractor has friends in high places and there has been no suggestion that these particular relationships influenced the choice of North American. But a full investigation of the Apollo project from contract award to the present seems called for in order to insure that so avoidable an accident does not happen again.

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