

# The First Executive Director of NASA and Governor O. Max Gardner

Herbert Kaufman's theory of organizational behavior holds that it is shaped largely by vast, impersonal forces. His view of the U.S. government is that the many offices and organizations making up its vast bureaucracy are likewise controlled by external forces — that no one individual can make much of a difference. The nineteenth-century historian Thomas Carlyle expounded a contrary view: the "great man" theory, in which strong leaders determine the outcome.

W. Henry Lambright notes correctly that, as with the "nature vs. nurture" controversy, the truth lies somewhere in between. Yet he also notes that there are occasions when an extraordinary leader can remold the organization he leads, directing outcomes as he chooses. James Edwin Webb was by all accounts an extraordinary man.

Webb was born in 1906 in rural Tally Ho, North Carolina<sup>2</sup> to parents who were both college graduates — a rarity in those days. His father, an idealistic educator, instilled in his children a love of learning and a drive for academic achievement. Webb broke his shoulder at the age of ten, and this injury troubled him for years, reinforcing his bent toward scholastic achievement versus athletics. Meanwhile, his mother taught him the value of expertise in practical matters, such as running a household on the meager income a teaching job provided. Webb enrolled at the University of North Carolina, but had to drop out after his freshman year for lack of money. He found a job with a construction firm near his home town, learning other practical skills such as shorthand, typing and how to fix his own car. These skills, plus new contacts, let him return to UNC after another year and work in its Bureau of Educational Research while completing his degree.

After graduating in 1928, Webb considered teaching science, but chose a more lucrative path, clerking at a law firm and studying law at night. However, the Depression put an end to these plans. Desperate to escape the stagnant economy of North Carolina, Webb applied to a marine aviator group just forming in New York. Despite knowing nothing about aviation or the military, he was accepted. He did well, also meeting the secretary to Congressman Edward Pou (D-NC), chair of the House Rules Committee. That position later became Webb's; it gave him still more contacts, taught him the ways of Washington, and

fostered his own love of power.<sup>3</sup> He moved on to become aide to lobbyist O. Max Gardner, former governor of North Carolina. An aviation dispute which Gardner helped resolve brought Webb to the attention of Thomas Morgan, president of Sperry Gyroscope. Morgan brought Webb aboard that company just as it began rapid growth at the outset of World War II. Webb's own role grew rapidly as he demonstrated a talent for executive leadership. His desire to fight the Axis powers warred with his role as a vital part of the war effort at Sperry. Finally in 1944 he convinced Morgan and the marines to let him enlist. He became commander of a marine radar unit destined to take part in the invasion of Japan. His orders had him shipping out on 14 August 1945. As it turned out, that was the day Japan officially surrendered.

Webb could have returned to Sperry and embarked on a lucrative career, but he wanted a change. Consulting O. Max Gardner led him to work half-time in Gardner's firm while pursuing a political career. But in a few months President Truman tapped Gardner to be his Undersecretary of the Treasury, and Gardner introduced Webb to Truman. So it was that Webb became Director of the Bureau of the Budget. Here he excelled, bolstering the agency's influence with President Truman<sup>4</sup> and earning a say in matters of policy.<sup>5</sup> He did less well at his next appointment, as Undersecretary of State. Dean Acheson, the Secretary, had alienated many congressmen through open disdain for the lack of foreign-policy expertise evidenced by their questions. (He had a similar disdain for Webb; but, like Webb, he was loyal to Truman. So they cooperated.) Then, as now, there was a war on, and State — not helped by Acheson's patrician attitudes — was losing the influence battle to a hard-charging Secretary of Defense.<sup>6</sup> There were squabbles within the State Department as well. Webb, on good terms with Congress, mended State's fences there and was able to hold up the Department's end against Defense. But these struggles wore him down. In 1952, suffering from intense migraines exacerbated by too much alcohol and tobacco, he resigned.

After a period of convalescence, he moved his family to Oklahoma City and went to work as president of Republic Supply, a division of Kerr-McGee Corporation. Republic was bleeding about \$40,000 per month. Webb discovered it was more a collection of individuals than a company. He reorganized it and soon it was in the black. He also had a favorable effect on the parent corporation. Once these changes had taken hold, and with the trust they engendered among the locals as a basis, Webb turned his attention to the public sector. Oklahoma's fiftieth anniversary of statehood was fast approaching, and he wanted

the celebration to focus on the state's future. In 1955, working with other public-spirited leaders, he set up the *Frontiers of Science Foundation* to coordinate the efforts of Oklahoma businesses and educators in improving the teaching of science in the Sooner State's high schools and colleges. The Foundation was successful. It was also well-timed; for soon after that statehood celebration, a little sphere called Sputnik made a big splash and excellence in technical education became the order of the day for the entire nation. President Eisenhower visited Oklahoma City in November 1957, praising the state and the Foundation in an address. By 1958, Webb had fulfilled his commitment to Kerr-McGee and was ready to return to the national scene. He had his pick of offers and chose to concentrate on science education, gradually ramping up activities on the east coast. By January 1960, He and his wife Patsy had returned to the city they loved best, Washington DC.

The offer to become NASA Administrator came a year later. It was a surprise to Webb, and not a welcome one. Not being a technical man, he felt unsuited for the post. For this and other reasons he tried to decline. But John Kennedy insisted, pointing out that the principal need was for management and political skills, and Webb could not refuse his president. As it turned out, Webb was the ideal man for the job, and it became his greatest triumph. This review is already too long, so I'll say no more about that triumph or its context. On pages 9-10, Lambright provides a concise summary of both: