Twitter Thread by Amy Shira Teitel

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Who should run NASA: a scientist or a bureaucrat? I don't have the answer, but I will share a little vignette from history (because I'm an historian) that I think is interesting and relevant... Please read on!



The Administrator typically changes with each President, usually to be politically in-line with the administration. When Kennedy took office, he wanted Jim Webb for the job.



Jim Webb arrived in Lyndon Johnson’s office on Jan. 30, 1961. The lawyer turned lobbyist and businessman who had been head of the Bureau of the Budget and as under-secretary of state during the Truman administration was wary of taking the job. NASA was considered a boondoggle.

Space stations and lunar missions were on the books for 1970 or later, so in the meantime, whoever ran the agency would have to stand up to the military trying to wrest control of space activities while managing an agency that might kill an astronaut in front of the whole world.

Not to mention, belief in Washington was that the country would lose interest soon enough. When the glamour of space faded, it would take its administrator down with it. It was, in essence, a career killer.

Webb met NASA's deputy administrator, Hugh Dryden (pic), in the waiting room.
“I don’t think I’m the right person for this job,” Webb said. “I’m not an engineer and I’ve never seen a rocket fly.”
“I agree,” Hugh replied. “I don’t think you are, either.”



Webb told JFK the same thing.

“No,” Kennedy replied. “I need somebody who understands policy. You’ve been undersecretary of state, and director of the budget. This program involves great issues of national and international policy, and that’s why I want you to do it.”



Webb led NASA until October of 1968, selling Washington on Apollo and doing the bulk of the political heavy lifting to get America to the Moon in the 1960s. I would say it's a compelling argument that NASA needs a bureaucrat with trusted scientists at its head.



This vignette was shortened from Fighting for Space; I go through the political decisions that shaped NASA as they related to astronaut selection in the early 1960s. https://t.co/XuBql5yWvk

I want to add something: Webb took the job as NASA Administrator on the condition that Dryden stay on as his Deputy. Dryden was a visionary in aeronautics and formerly head of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, and Webb trusted Dryden to be his science advisor.

From FFS: "[Webb] was sworn in as administrator on February 14 with Hugh Dryden as his deputy and Robert Seamans as associate administrator. With Hugh as his technical sounding board and Bob managing the employees, the triad running the space agency was a powerful one."