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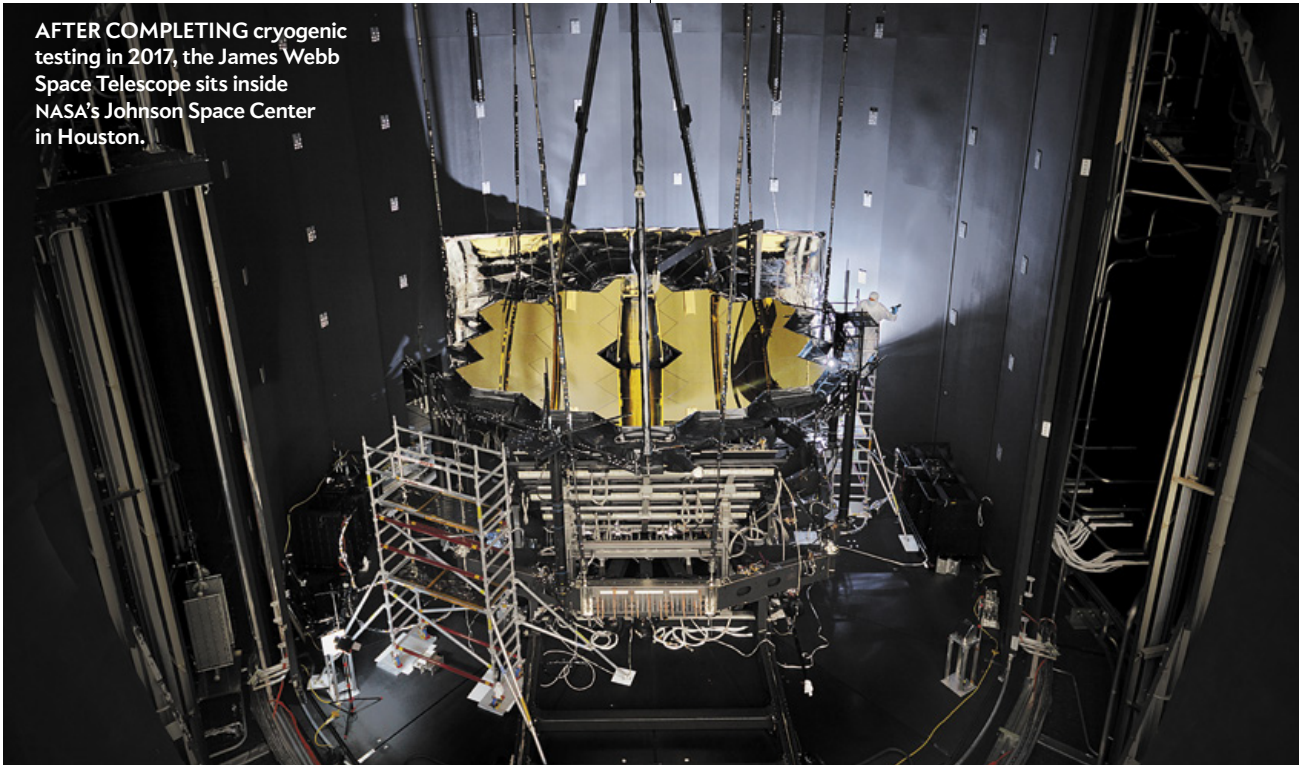
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AFTER COMPLETING cryogenic testing in 2017, the James Webb Space Telescope sits inside NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston.



Rename the James Webb Space Telescope

It shouldn't honor someone who helped enforce homophobic policies

By Chanda Prescod-Weinstein, Sarah Tuttle, Lucianne Walkowicz and Brian Nord

Because of its ability to see more deeply into spacetime than any instrument before it, the Hubble Space Telescope has completely transformed the way we see the universe—and ourselves. The James Webb Space Telescope (JWST), often called “the next Hubble,” promises to do even better. Slated to launch later this year, JWST will peer farther into the universe than any optical or infrared telescope before it and could show us galaxies in their infancy, probe potentially habitable worlds and explore the mysteries of dark energy. These kinds of data not only provide insight into the universe but also help us humans situate our earthly concerns in context.

It is unfortunate, therefore, that NASA's current plan is to launch this incredible instrument into space carrying the name of a man whose legacy at best is complicated and at worst reflects com-

licity in homophobic discrimination in the federal government.

James Webb, who died in 1992, was a career civil servant whose time at the U.S. Department of State under President Harry S. Truman included advancing the development of psychological warfare as a cold war tool. He later oversaw the Apollo program as NASA administrator. When he arrived at NASA in 1961, his leadership role meant he was in part responsible for implementing what was by then federal policy: the purging of LGBT individuals from the workforce. When he was at State, this policy was enforced by those who worked under him. As early as 1950, he was aware of this policy, which was a forerunner to the antigay witch hunt known today as the lavender scare. Historian David K. Johnson's 2004 book on the subject, *The Lavender Scare*, discusses archival evidence indicating that Webb, along with others in State Department leadership, was involved in Senate discussions that ultimately kicked off a devastating series of federal policies.

Many astronomers feel a debt of gratitude for Webb's work as NASA administrator and are appreciative of and nostalgic for the time during the Apollo program when the space agency thrived. But while appreciation and nostalgia are important, they are not sufficient. Webb might have played a positive role at NASA, but his greater legacy beyond the agency is also relevant. Now that we know of Webb's silence at State and his actions at NASA, we think it is time to rename JWST. The name of such an important mission, which promises to live in the popular and scientific psyche for decades, should be a reflection of our highest values.

The allegations of Webb's complicity in persecution received broader public attention about six years ago. Although some astron-

omers reacted with dismay at the time, many in the community believed the opportunity to rename the telescope had passed. More recently, an astronomer attempted to refute Webb's negative image in an unreviewed blog post, including by highlighting the fact that a homophobic quote was misattributed to Webb on his Wikipedia page. Astronomers on social media began to argue that in the absence of this specific quote, there was little to prove that Webb was responsible for homophobic policies.

But that correction changes nothing. Webb was in leadership as the lavender scare unfolded. Additional archival evidence, easily found by Columbia University astronomer Adrian Lucy, underlines Webb's role as a facilitator of homophobic policy discussions with members of the Senate. In particular, in 1950 assistant secretary of state Carlisle Humelsine submitted a set of memos to Webb that included "objectives and methods of operation of the Senate Committee established to look into the problem," which Webb then shared during a meeting with Senator Clyde Hoey of North Carolina. The records clearly show that Webb planned and participated in meetings during which he handed over homophobic material. There is no record of him choosing to stand up for the humanity of those being persecuted.

As someone in management, Webb bore responsibility for policies enacted under his leadership, including homophobic ones that were in place when he became NASA administrator. Some argue that if Webb was complicit, so was everyone working in the agency's administration at the time. We agree. But NASA is not launching a telescope named after its entire administration.

Some might be tempted to see the proposal to rename JWST as an attempt to litigate decades-old history. In fact, discrimination against queer people, including scientists, still affects their lives and careers. In 2016 the American Physical Society released the LGBT Climate in Physics report. Its core conclusion was that many queer scientists fundamentally do not feel safe in their workplaces. The climate is exclusionary, and physicists who identify as more than one minority, including LGBT+ physicists of color, experience the most harassment and exclusion. Astrophysicists who are LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual and/or ally, plus nonstraight identities not explicitly listed) exist and are marginalized. A 2021 study published in *Science Advances* found similar outcomes.

These practices are a continuation of history that dates back to Webb's era. Frank Kameny was an astronomer who was hired by the U.S. Army Map Service in 1957. When he was unwilling to provide information about his sexual orientation, he was investigated and subsequently fired. He could not find justice through the courts at that time, but he did spend the rest of his life as an activist. Kameny's case is a clear example of homophobic injustice during the era when Webb was active.

The same hypermasculinist fears that characterized the lavender scare and other ideological purges during the cold war continue to animate the incarnation of far-right movements across the globe. So what signal does it send to current and future generations of scientists when we prioritize the legacies of complicit government officials over the dreams of the next generation?

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With the launch of JWST just a few months away and a new presidential administration (and new NASA administrator) taking the helm, NASA has an opportunity to choose a new namesake that will embrace a future of freedom and inspiration for all.

This struggle is not limited to science or to the past: Just a few months ago Representative Joaquin Castro of Texas introduced the LOVE Act of 2020, which "requires the State Department to set up an independent commission to review the cases of individuals who were fired since the 1950s as a result of their sexual orientation, receive testimony, and correct employment records." Passage of the act would not only prompt an apology from Congress for its past complicity in the lavender scare but also provide protections for queer diplomats at home and abroad.

James Webb's legacy is the antithesis of the dreaming and sense of freedom inspired by the exploration of deep time and distant space. We will use this new telescope to learn about the origins of galaxies, the atmospheres of exoplanets and the nature of dark energy, which will offer insight into the fate the universe holds for us. We hope we have already learned some lessons about how humanity will move toward the future here on Earth rather than repeating mistakes of the past. There will always be complications in naming monuments or facilities after individuals. No hero is perfect.

Yet we can honor the incredible heroes who worked tirelessly to liberate others. Before she became a conductor on the Underground Railroad, a disabled and enslaved Harriet Tubman almost certainly used the North Star, just as it is documented that others did, to navigate her way to freedom. Naming the next Hubble the Harriet Tubman Space Telescope (HTST) would ensure that her memory lives always in the heavens that gave her and so many others hope. It could also serve as a reminder that the night sky is a shared heritage that belongs to all of us, including LGBTQIA+ people. The time for lionizing leaders who acquiesced in a history of harm is over. We should name telescopes out of love for those who came before us and led the way to freedom—and out of love for those who are coming up after. ■

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