NASA AT 50 ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

ROBERT W. COBB
INTERVIEWED BY SANDRA JOHNSON
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JOHNSON: Today is March 20th, 2007. We are at NASA Headquarters in Washington, D.C., to speak with Robert W. Cobb, the Inspector General for NASA, for the NASA at 50 Oral History Project. The interviewer is Sandra Johnson. In preparation for the space agency's fiftieth anniversary, the NASA Headquarters History Office commissioned this oral history project to gather thoughts, experiences, and reflections from NASA's top managers. The information recorded today will be transcribed and then placed in the History Archives here at NASA Headquarters, where it can be accessed for future projects.

Can I answer any questions for you today before we begin?

COBB: No.

JOHNSON: Thank you for providing us this time today. As Inspector General [IG] for NASA and in accordance with the Inspector General Act of 1978, your office conducts objective oversight of NASA programs and operations and independently reports to the Administrator, Congress, and the public to further the agency's accomplishment of its mission. If you would, please begin by briefly describing your background and how you came to be in this position for NASA.

COBB: My background is as an attorney. I worked in private practice for five years. Then I joined the government fifteen years ago. I worked for nine years at an office called the Office of

Government Ethics, which focuses on standards of conduct, conflicts of interest, and financial disclosure. In January of 2001 I was asked to come to work in the White House to be the ethics counsel for the new [George W.] Bush administration. I worked as Ethics Counsel in the Office of the Counsel to the President under Alberto [R.] Gonzales for fifteen months and was nominated for the position of Inspector General while I was in the White House; was confirmed by the United States Senate; and was appointed to the position of Inspector General in April of 2002.

JOHNSON: Let's talk about the scope of your current responsibilities in this position and what you're responsible for, how the office is organized, and that sort of thing.

COBB: The mandate under the Inspector General Act for Inspectors General is to root out fraud, waste, and abuse, and promote the economy and efficiency of the agency where the Inspector General resides. That is an extraordinarily broad mandate, and so there's a tremendous amount of discretion in terms of how the resources that are given to an Inspector General Office are applied. Organizationally, we have two fundamental business lines. One is audit, and the other is investigations.

The investigations focus primarily on violations of law, and that includes criminal laws. So our investigative team has law enforcement authority, pursuant to which they act as federal law enforcement officials, conducting investigations, coordinating investigations of violations of criminal statutes with the appropriate prosecutorial teams, which is usually the United States Attorneys' offices for the various districts in which the investigations occur.

With the respect to the Office of Audits, we have responsibilities in terms of carrying out the financial statement audit, which we use a contractor to perform, and we do that both under the IG Act, but also under the Chief Financial Officer's Act. In addition, we conduct myriad performance audits, again with respect to the broad mandate to promote the economy and efficiency of the agency. We employ these audits really to see where we can add value in terms of the agency's execution of its mission.

JOHNSON: When you were working those first fifteen years for the government and then later for Alberto Gonzales, did you have any idea that you would want to one day work at NASA or that you would be? Had you followed NASA and the program through the years?

COBB: Well, certainly, I think just as a member of the American public, it's [fantastic] to have an opportunity to come work [at] NASA. I do not have a science and engineering background academically. In fact, if there was any subject other than law that I had a background in, it was history. [And NASA has a great history.] So from my standpoint it was a tremendous opportunity for me to have the opportunity to come and be associated with an agency like NASA.

JOHNSON: Well, we talked about the scope of your current responsibilities. As far as this office and the mission of this office historically, do you have an idea or can you explain what it has been historically, and then compare it to today's mission and if it's changed any as far as the mission itself?

COBB: The mission hasn't changed. I think that since the Inspector General Act was passed in 1978 that there have been some modifications and some additional mandates that are occasionally included in the IG Act or in other law.

But fundamentally the objective of providing independent and objective reviews of agency programs and operations is the thrust of it. In part, it is an attempt under our constitutional framework to have an internal oversight function that can report not only to the Administrator for purposes of the benefit of the agency, and that the agency can respond to that internal oversight, but also to provide some sunlight and transparency into the government's operations and the agency's operations to the elected officials on the [Capitol] Hill, so that they may take such legislative and other action as appropriate in fulfillment of their oversight responsibility.

So I'd say that the mission has not fundamentally changed. At various times there are some differences in philosophy in terms of how the mission is executed. Independence means different things [to different people]. From my perspective, it is critically important for us to carry out our mission to be able to credibly speak to the issues that face NASA. That requires, for example, technical talent in our shop; engineers, safety experts, contracting experts, information technology experts, with people with backgrounds in those areas. That hasn't always been the case….

So there's relatively minor philosophical approaches towards how business is conducted that can change from time to time, and I could go on and on with respect to how, similarly in the investigative sphere, there can be emphasis on major program fraud, which is something that we try to focus in on, as opposed to relatively petty criminal activities. So, for example, if your metric for success is numbers of indictments, maybe you'd focus on pursuing petty thefts of

property, and maybe you'll get more indictments than if you focus on major program fraud by NASA contractors, which may result in fewer indictments but much greater recoveries, and maybe a different type of deterrent than you'd get if you were pursuing the petty thefts. So there's different ways of approaching that field as well, but the mission has fundamentally remained the same.

JOHNSON: Well, you mentioned safety, and shortly after you started in 2002, then STS-107 and the [Space Shuttle] *Columbia* accident happened. Since that time we've returned to flight, and safety has been a focus. How is your relationship with the Safety Office and Mission Assurance, and how do you deal with safety up here in the Inspector General's Office?

COBB: Well, I'd say both before and after *Columbia*, starting out with my confirmation hearings, I've emphasized the importance of safety in connection with the value that our office could bring to NASA. So there's different elements of how that would play out, and it's very complex in the context of how we execute our mission. We can conduct compliance audits where we focus in on whether or not certain boxes have been checked in terms of the execution of NASA policy and directive requirements. In those we can point to NASA's failure to abide its own requirements.

Sometimes those compliance audits don't get at whether or not there is a major, systemic problem in terms of that word *culture* that is frequently used in connection with *Columbia*. I emphasized when I came in as Inspector General that our safety audit staff had, in connection with its audit of Shuttle activities, a responsibility to communicate through me to the [NASA]

Administrator whether or not we believed, based on our audit work, that there were any impediments to launching the Space Shuttle.

That perspective was something that was unfamiliar to the audit staff when I arrived. [That staff had] been focused on compliance [auditing and] felt very comfortable in connection with the scope of those particular audits to articulate the findings that had been previously made. [They were, however,] much more reluctant to step up to the plate and really be responsible for articulating from our perspective whether or not there were any such impediments. That's something that when I came in, as a first step prior to *Columbia*, I wanted to make sure that if we thought that there was a problem, we would communicate that to the Administrator.

Columbia resulted in a substantial redirection in resources of the Office of Inspector General's auditing capacity, and in investigative functions, because there was a number of investigative matters that resulted from debris and the theft of debris from the recovery effort. So we dedicated some investigative resources there.

I became an observer to the activities of the *Columbia* Accident Investigation Board, emphasizing that this was the most important thing that had occurred at NASA in some time, and that the Office of Inspector General was going to be involved in seeing how the activities of the board and the analysis of the various issues relating to the accident [were handled,] and that was important to me. I made a recommendation to the Administrator that he appoint me as an observer to the board, which he did.

But in terms of the dedication of audit resources, we wanted to—and this reflects my overall philosophy of trying to be an impact player in terms of making recommendations and getting into the issues that are most significant to the management of the agency, but also to those on the Hill with oversight responsibilities and ultimately the American taxpayer—that we

were going to dedicate resources on how NASA was doing in connection with the Return-to-Flight activity.

Now, there was some overlap between our activities and ultimately the Stafford-Covey board that was convened for purposes of following up on the *Columbia* Accident Investigation Board's report of investigation and recommendations that were included there. But we wanted to make sure, and we wanted to use some of our resources, to try to see whether or not there were any gaps; whether there was any additional value that we could bring to help ensure that the agency was headed in the right direction after the *Columbia* accident.

In terms of ultimately why would we do that, it gets back to this question of bringing a focus to issues relating to safety and really aligning the resources of our office to make sure that we could get on top of that.

At the same time that we were dedicating audit resources to Return to Flight, there was also, as part of the *Columbia* accident, a notion that there were deep cultural problems at NASA in terms of the ability of people to raise safety issues. So we also dedicated resources to outlining the circumstances, and this was at the same time Bryan [D.] O'Connor and the Office of Safety and Mission Assurance was also focused on this issue from his perspective. But we were examining, in effect, how issues should be raised to superiors, what are people's rights associated with bringing whistle-blower type activities, and we published some guidance to NASA employees that can be utilized in connection with those types of issues.

In addition we dedicated both audit and investigative resources to running down a great number of whistle-blower type concerns, where people had issues that they were raising they thought that the agency should focus in on a certain issue, or that they weren't being listened to

in connection with a position that they had, and we dedicated substantial resources to looking at that.

So I'd say both before and after *Columbia* and to the current day, a substantial portion of our resources are dedicated to safety and mission success. I'll give another example. Both before and after *Columbia* and before I was here there would be any number of allegations that contractors had provided the agency substandard parts, parts not in conformity with the contract, things that were purchased or manufactured not in accordance with specifications. We investigate these types of serious safety complaints and pursue them rigorously.

Another similar type of investigative action involves false certifications, where there's hardware or software that has failed certain testing at a contractor, subcontractor level, and then subsequently is represented as having passed those tests. That's the type of thing that we dedicate substantial resources [to] and, unfortunately, [we] have had substantial prosecutorial success in bringing about convictions of people who have defrauded NASA and the taxpayer in what represents a threat to safety.

Notably, in connection with those investigations, when we get allegations of product substitution, false certification of testing, that's the type of thing that we would notify the appropriate folks within the agency to ensure that there are not ongoing safety issues in connection with products, so that we are assured of the safe, or as safe as reasonably possible, execution of the mission.

So those are some of the types of safety focuses that we have in the Office of Inspector General.

JOHNSON: You mentioned the resources and how much has been devoted to safety, and even when you were first appointed it seemed to be part of your vision for this office. If we can talk about that a little bit, about your strategic vision and how you would like to shape the Office of Inspector General and the things that you would like to focus on, and whether the budget that you have allows you to do things you'd like to do; and if you had all the money that you wanted for this office, what you might do with it.

COBB: Well, I think that, in terms of strategic vision, that I've already talked about some of the basic concepts. We've got a very broad mandate to promote the economy and efficiency of the agency as well as root out fraud, waste, and abuse. So to me—and maybe sports analogies are not ideal to use, but I'll use one in any event. We have an opportunity to be a free safety for the agency and independently roam and pick those areas that we think are most important for our dedication of resources, so that we can assist the agency and bring value to the agency in terms of helping the agency execute its mission. It's probably no more complex than that in terms of what the vision is.

In terms of whether or not, and it sounds like part of your question was directed at my sense of whether or not we have the resources that are sufficient to execute that vision. I think that we do, and we have. It's very challenging, especially at an agency that has such technological skill, for us to weigh in on many of these technological issues and how the agency can do better. As a practical result of that, much of our focus is on how the agency institutionally manages its resources. I'd say a great deal of our most significant contribution on the audit side relate to institutional management issues and how the agency can utilize the resources that it has to most effectively carry out the mission.

JOHNSON: You mentioned earlier, and I was going to follow up with that, about reporting to Congress. How often do you do that? Is that a set time that you do it, or is it just as it's needed?

COBB: Under the Inspector General Act there's a semiannual report that our office issues, and so that's the primary vehicle. That's the statutory vehicle pursuant to which we conduct our reporting both to the agency and to Congress. As a practical matter, your question remarked "as needed," that is also a manner of communication, so that if, for example, we know that a committee or subcommittee that conducts oversight on NASA is interested in a particular issue, we will communicate with them about our body of work that addresses that issue, so it again is enabled to conduct the oversight responsibilities that it needs to.

There are certain other things that relate to the law enforcement and criminal investigations. That's the kind of thing that we're very sensitive [to], and it may, in fact, if there's a grand jury, be illegal for us to be communicating to others about what is ongoing in connection with a criminal investigation. So there are things that we feel comfortable communicating both to the agency and to the Hill, and there are other things that we are not comfortable communicating.

I'd say that from my perspective there are many issues that we refer to management and we inform management of that don't warrant an investigation or don't warrant a full audit, or we may have preliminary insight to some issue that we think management would benefit from that we will communicate, that doesn't rise to an importance level that it be communicated to Congress.

I'd say philosophically—and this is something I haven't mentioned, but it's worth talking about—from my perspective in connection with the manner in which we can best add value to the agency, it's to provide insight to problems as early as we possibly can. That's challenging, because everyone likes to wait until the ink is dry on the report and it's not going to be subject to any subsequent revision before reporting. But in terms of allowing the agency to take remedial action as early as it possibly can, sometimes you can't wait for a report to be finally inked to communicate that there's serious issues that need to be addressed.

The philosophy, as I've articulated in other fora, is sometimes if there's an accident or a failure of the agency, it's not that difficult to come in after an accident or problem has occurred and deconstruct what it was that caused that problem. Many times when you do that you're coming in and you're telling the agency what it already knows, because it knows after the fact what it was that caused the problem.

From an example from the home front, when my children are waving their hand around a glass of milk, one might say, "Stop waving your hand around the glass of milk, or you will knock it over," which is a way of preventing a problem, as opposed to conducting an audit after the hand has hit the glass and knocked it over and you have spilt milk, and coming back and reporting at that point that waving the hand around the glass of milk is not particularly helpful in terms of saving the agency from that particular problem, although it may be useful from a lessons learned standpoint….

So that's a philosophical approach that I have. If, to the extent we can, we can come and say, "Don't wave your hand around a glass of milk, or it will get knocked over and you will have a problem," that's a much more effective and value-added way of doing business, and we try very hard to do that.

JOHNSON: Since we've had a recent change in Congress, and you've worked both with a Republican-controlled Congress and now a Democratic-controlled Congress, does that have any effect on your office and in your dealings with the Administration or Congress?

COBB: It's not going to have any effect as far as I can tell in terms of the deployment of our resources. I've already outlined for you in general terms what we consider to be important and how we deploy our resources to get after those types of things.

…Of course, we're very sensitive to congressional requests. If we receive a request that we deploy resources in connection with a particular issue that the elected officials believe is important, we're going to consider that very closely. Obviously, those elected officials, they believe that it's warranted that we deploy our resources in a certain way, and we're going to listen to that very closely, but ultimately make the decision ourselves on what our responsibilities are and how best to deploy those resources.

JOHNSON: Let's talk about NASA's impact on society. You are a recent member of the NASA family, and so you've been on both sides now. What do you feel is the impact that NASA's had on our society in the past and possibly for the future?

COBB: Well, I've been here for five years, or almost five years, and in the scope of the tenure of many NASA employees, that is a short period of time. From my perspective, and why, when the opportunity to come work at NASA was offered to me—NASA represents the most exciting agency in the executive branch. It is a technological leader. It's a leader in terms of what is

possible, what can stretch the human imagination and skill and execution of missions that are civil oriented rather than defense oriented. From that standpoint, I think that to the American people and to the world, NASA represents a place where the dreams of exploration can be executed, and that is, more than anything else, I think, the great value that NASA brings to society.

JOHNSON: And you feel that's the most important role that NASA has for this nation?

COBB: I think that it is. Quite obviously part of that overall mission of exploration involves not only the [human] exploration of space but scientific exploration; [for example collecting information that could provide insight on] global warming, for example, is part of that mission, learning, in terms of scientific exploration, there's any number of endeavors that mankind can devise to fulfill its need to explore [and learn]. Again, I think that that's what NASA represents, that opportunity, and I couldn't be more pleased to be a part of it.

JOHNSON: What do you feel that is the relative importance of human exploration and robotic exploration in NASA?

COBB: Well, there's great debates on what the relative merit of scientific exploration, human exploration, robotic exploration, and they all mix and match in various ways and overlap. I have debates within my own mind as to—I'd say one extreme on the human exploration side, you'll have a person like John (W.) Young articulate that there's never been a successful one-planet species, and that's sort of a thought-provoker. [Of course, there is much exploration with

the potential for great scientific return which can be done robotically that cannot be done at this point in time with humans. And there is exploration that could be done with humans, but is so much cheaper or involves so much less risk to use robots than conducting the exploration with humans that conducting the activity robotically makes best sense.]

From my perspective, the point of human space flight is human space flight, to put humans into space and to have them explore—to put humans into harm's way to advance this notion that humankind is not static, that we're not just ants. We're going to explore, and I think I would agree with many who would believe that that is the essence of humanity, that we continue to explore and look outward rather than be content with a static manner of being. [So there is a great balancing of factors to be done in making the trades between robotic and human exploration.]

JOHNSON: Well, through NASA's history there have been many opportunities to learn lessons because of tragedies or accidents or other instances that have happened, both technically and organizationally. What do you feel are the lessons learned based on your experience with NASA or based on what you know about its history?

COBB: Well, a couple of things. First, that complacency is something to be avoided; to constantly be critical and to ask questions of ourselves in terms of how are we doing at all times. There's the Gene [Eugene F.] Kranz comment to be "tough and competent." But also I'd say as part of that, that notion of what is toughness and what is competence, is to continually ask the difficult questions of what are we doing, why are we doing it, and how are we doing it, to ensure

ourselves that we are not being complacent in connection with our execution of the overall mission.

From another standpoint I think that in terms of preservation of the taxpayers' resources in carrying out the mission as effectively and efficiently as the agency can, I think that there's some inherent challenges to managing these overall mission objectives, in terms of the manner in which the agency is organized, that just presents challenges. One is obviously the geography and having centers dispersed around the country.

The other is in making sure that the institutional functions of the agency, such as financial management, information technology, security, contract management, that these things are properly aligned with the missions, and that the missions are fully integrated with those institutional requirements which are important for purposes of preserving the public fisc. So that's more down in the weeds in terms of challenge to any NASA management, but is important in terms of the ability to accomplish the overall mission, because if, for example, the Congress or the American people believe that NASA can't conduct its lofty missions effectively and efficiently, the agency's ability to do that would be at risk.

JOHNSON: You mentioned earlier the culture after *Columbia* and the questions about the culture. What is your perception of the NASA culture?

COBB: That's an extremely difficult question, and it gets to what is a culture, and a culture, I guess, in terms of this question, is how do people feel about the execution of the mission, and is the agency fully dedicated to maximize the benefit that it gets from the taxpayer in terms of executing the mission.

I'd say there's a lot of different cultures. I'd say, overall, there's a culture of people wanting to do what they think is right by the taxpayer in executing their vision of what NASA should be doing. So people are passionate. I think there's a culture—and this may be another way of saying what I'm saying—there's a culture of passion about the business.

The problem with that is that people have different passions, and those passions conflict in terms of the battle for resources to effectuate those visions and that passion. So to an extent there isn't a single, unified culture. There isn't a single, unified vision for each person in terms of what should be done. What there is, is there's the President's vision as implemented by the Administrators at NASA, and that vision gets coordinated with the laws of the United States, the Congress as the elected officials, so that people down the chain of command don't always get what they want in connection with how the mission is executed.

So I think the fundamental point, and it's positive, is that there's a culture of great passion, talent, experience, smarts, at NASA, and there's great challenges in taking that passion and coordinating it and having it executed from the mission standpoint.

JOHNSON: If a young person came to you today and said that they were considering a career with NASA, either in the technical field or possibly your field, what would you say to them?

COBB: Well, from my standpoint this is not a hypothetical that hasn't occurred. There are a number of people who have contacted me and indicated that they are a college student, or he or she is a college student, or a parent of that college student, or a friend of a friend of a friend of a college student who has a particular expertise that might fit in with NASA. I couldn't encourage them more to come and join the NASA team, in part because I think that, one, I'm a big fan of

government service, but, two, I don't think there's a better place to come and learn and make contributions towards the advancement of these things that are really so great.

JOHNSON: Well, is there anything that we haven't talked about today that you'd like to add for this project?

COBB: Probably. I just express my thanks for your coming and talking to me. I'd say that I'm a big fan of not only of the agency but the role of the Office of Inspector General and the importance of it in terms of being able to step back and look at agency operations and provide advice and counsel as to whether or not, from the independent perspective that the office has, in whether the agency is proceeding down the right track. I think it's an invaluable tool, and I also think, from the investigative side, it's an absolutely necessary tool, because unfortunately there are those who will either breach the public trust or will defraud the United States and the taxpayer in connection with the spending of taxpayers' money.

So I'd say that would be it.

JOHNSON: I appreciate you talking with us today.

COBB: Okay.

JOHNSON: Thank you.

COBB: Thank you.

[End of interview]