

NASA WON'T RENAME FLAGSHIP JAMES WEBB TELESCOPE

Some astronomers are angry, and say Webb bears responsibility for agency's past anti-LGBT+ activities.

By Alexandra Witze

NASA has decided not to rename its soon-to-be-launched flagship observatory, the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST), after investigating whether its namesake, former NASA administrator James Webb, was involved in persecuting gay and lesbian people in the 1950s and 1960s. The agency says it found no evidence to support the allegations.

The decision and the lack of transparency with which it was announced – NASA released no report about the scope of the investigation – has angered a number of astronomers.

“I’m disappointed,” says Johanna Teske, an astronomer at the Carnegie Institution for Science in Washington DC. “Without knowing what factors were considered, it’s hard for me to respect the decision to keep the current name.”

Since May, more than 1,200 people, including scientists who are slated to use the telescope after its planned December launch, have signed a petition calling for the JWST to be renamed. Webb held multiple leadership positions in the US government during a period in which gay and lesbian federal employees were systematically fired because of their sexual orientation. For instance, he was NASA administrator when an agency employee was fired in 1963 on suspicion of being gay.

In response to the concerns, NASA began an internal study of historical documents that might shed light on Webb’s behaviour towards gay and lesbian people. On 27 September, current agency administrator Bill Nelson released a one-sentence statement to some media outlets, including *Nature*, saying: “We have found no evidence at this time that warrants changing the name of the James Webb Space Telescope.” NASA’s acting chief historian, Brian Odom, who led the inquiry, told *Nature* on 30 September that he considers the investigation closed.

‘Gut punch’

A NASA official had said in June that the agency would be transparent with the scientific community in its decision, but there is no final written report that could be released. Odom says that “under the circumstances of COVID, the investigation was as thorough as possible and



NASA’s James Webb Space Telescope being prepared for shipment to its launch site.

very objective”. He says it consisted of several archivists going through NASA’s internal records, interviewing other historians who had studied Webb, and hiring an external historian to explore aspects such as Webb’s career at other government agencies.

Odom says he met Nelson several times to present the material that the investigators were able to gather. “The administrator’s participation in this was very thoughtful and very objective,” he says. Nelson made the decision to keep the name of the telescope.

But some think NASA’s decision is the wrong one. Webb, they say, was head of the agency during a period of discrimination, and bears responsibility. “The gut punch is in the outright refusal to hear the voices of queer astronomers,” says Brian Nord, an astrophysicist at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory in Batavia, Illinois. “This is a refusal to confront history. If we can’t have that, how are we going to shed light on the oppression that people are facing?”

Nord is one of four astronomers who led the petition for the telescope to be renamed. The other three are Lucianne Walkowicz at the Adler Planetarium in Chicago, Illinois; Chanda Prescod-Weinstein at the University of New Hampshire in Durham; and Sarah Tuttle at the University of Washington in Seattle. In an

e-mail to *Nature* about NASA’s decision, they wrote: “For all the institution’s talk of equity and diversity, they don’t seem to be particularly concerned with public accountability about sensitive issues that have impacted a historically marginalized group.”

At the heart of the controversy is what responsibility government officials bear for discriminatory actions and policies at agencies they headed. Webb ran NASA between 1961 and 1968, during the height of the exploration programmes that eventually sent astronauts to walk on the Moon. Critics point out that Webb was therefore in charge in 1963, when Clifford Norton, a suspected gay employee, was fired.

Odom says he looked closely at the Norton case for evidence of whether Webb was involved in directing the firing. “It just didn’t turn up,” he says.

But the broader context is important for assessing Webb’s legacy, critics say. Webb worked in the US government system at a time when firing gay people was seen as acceptable and even encouraged. Rolf Danner, an astronomer at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, who is chair of the American Astronomical Society’s committee on sexual orientation and gender minorities in astronomy, says Webb was probably an effective manager in that framework. “I just don’t think that makes him the right choice for NASA’s premier science project more than 60 years later.”

Naming a telescope

As successor to the Hubble Space Telescope, the JWST will study cosmic phenomena including star formation, galaxy evolution and exoplanets. International partners in the mission include the European and Canadian space agencies. It was named in 2002 by former NASA administrator Sean O’Keefe, who wanted to highlight Webb’s accomplishments in government. Webb “had the ability to bring together those from multiple disciplines and collectively work together to achieve something larger than themselves”, says O’Keefe, who is now at Syracuse University in New York. He says that NASA would not be the same today had Webb not been administrator.

Astronomers who disagree with NASA’s decision are now considering the future. For many, boycotting the JWST is not an option, because of its transformational capabilities. Some are talking about ways to acknowledge the controversy while still working with JWST data, perhaps by putting information about Webb’s associations with anti-LGBT+ actions in the acknowledgements of papers. Others might call the telescope something else in their dealings with it. For instance, Prescod-Weinstein tweeted on 30 September: “I am personally thrilled about the Just Wonderful Space Telescope (JWST).”