

Engineering Academy Pays \$687 500 Hush Money to Ousted President to Avoid Unseemly Squabble

The imbroglio between the National Academy of Engineering and the president its members voted out of office seems to be resolved. In a memorandum to 1900 members and foreign associates of the NAE, its chairman, Alan M. Lovelace, announced on 26 November that the NAE had settled its yearlong dispute with Harold Liebowitz, who was unseated last June as the academy's president. Under the terms of the agreement, Liebowitz will receive a lump sum of \$687 500, for which he relinquished any claim to the job and to any related positions in the NAE, in the National Research Council and in the Arnold and Mabel Beckman Center, operated by the National Academies of Sciences and Engineering in Irvine, California. The agreement allows Liebowitz, a former dean of engineering at George Washington University, to remain a member of the NAE and to call himself a former NAE president.

Lovelace's memo says that the NAE will provide only \$25 000 from the academy's endowment fund, which is currently worth about \$40 million. Most of the payment, according to the memo, will come from the academy's liability insurance and from "indirect cost recovery," the overhead charges on

activities carried out in the academy complex, mainly by the bread-and-butter studies of the research council for Federal agencies. Academy officials are not sure the government will agree to allow overhead payments to rise to cover the settlement or even to divert the overhead to pay off Liebowitz. But William Wulf, NAE's interim president, insists that "legal expenses are legitimate overhead."

According to Lovelace, the agreement provides that both the academies and Liebowitz "release each other from any claims arising from or in connection with or relating to acts or omissions of or affecting Liebowitz in various capacities relating to his role as president of the NAE." The academies and Liebowitz both sought to avoid the costs and uncertainties of prolonged litigation. Legal fees and expenses for both sides are reckoned at almost \$300 000, which will bring the total settlement to nearly \$1 million.

Liebowitz angered many old guard members in 1991 when he challenged the NAE's annointed candidate for president and was defeated in the attempt. In 1994, he got on the ballot again by circulating a petition to run for president against a candidate chosen by the NAE hierarchy. Liebowitz tapped into

a sense of unease and uncertainty among the organization's members by offering them a larger voice in academy affairs when he became president. He advocated elevating the status of engineers in Washington, enabling more rank-and-file members to serve on research council committees and enhancing NAE's position against the older, richer and more powerful NAS in the operation of the academy complex. In April 1995, Liebowitz was elected by a plurality of 37 votes.

Once in office, Liebowitz butted heads with the NAE's staff and the NAS's leaders in actions affecting the research council (where he was vice chairman to its chairman, Bruce Alberts, the NAS president). As a direct consequence, Liebowitz received a vote of no confidence from both the NAS and NAE councils (see PHYSICS TODAY, April 1996, page 48).

At a special meeting last 29 March, the NAE council adopted a resolution proposing that the organization's by-laws be amended to allow for the removal of any elected officer or councilor. The council then submitted the proposal to the members, who approved the amendment by a vote of 1145 to 196, and on 9 May, five days after the vote was tallied, the NAE council adopted a resolution for Liebowitz's removal. The die was cast. On 24 June, NAE members decided by a vote of 1179 to 179 to dump Liebowitz.

Around the academy complex, Liebowitz is regarded as a kind of D. B. Cooper, the legendary gentleman hijacker who extracted \$200 000 for not setting off a bomb in an airplane and then parachuted into obscurity. But Wulf, a professor of computer sciences at the University of Virginia (see PHYSICS TODAY, December, page 38), says Liebowitz's election had projected the concerns of NAE members to take an active part in NAE and research council activities. "There is no question that the NAE needs to be more responsive to its membership," Wulf admits.

In a final line of his memo, Lovelace, onetime deputy administrator of NASA and former corporate vice president of General Dynamics's space systems division and chairman of the corporation's Commercial Launch Services, provided his own opinion of the saga: "It is my sincere hope that the agreement will close an unhappy and unfortunate incident for all the parties involved."

IRWIN GOODWIN ■

NSF Drafts New Criteria for Judging Proposal Reviews

The National Science Foundation is seeking comments on its proposed new guidelines for peer reviewers to evaluate each research proposal. The changes are intended to make the criteria for proposal reviewing both shorter and clearer. The National Science Board has approved the changes and asked for comments from scientists before adopting the new criteria. If the changes are adopted, the new criteria will go into effect in a few months.

At present, NSF receives nearly 30 000 proposals for research grants each year and funds about 30%, relying mainly on the judgments solicited from some 170 000 peer reviewers. Reviewers give each proposal just one grade and one commentary. The grade is supposed to be based on four detailed criteria: the researcher's competence, the work's intrinsic scientific merit, its utility or relevance, and its effect on the scientific infrastructure. The new guidelines would have reviewers consider just two factors: the quality of the proposed research and its likely impact. The impact could involve anything from the mentoring of students from underrepresented minorities in science and engineering to the development of new technologies.

The idea is to give reviewers more flexibility in the peer process. "We're still in the business of picking the best research by the best people," says NSF director Neal Lane. But by limiting the criteria, which were last revised in 1981, NSF officials hope reviewers will express their thoughts more openly and program managers will be better able to assess proposals. At present, reviewers have a difficult time with the question of research relevance or utility, says Lane. "As a result, they tended to ignore it. When I was a reviewer [as a physicist at Rice University], I wasn't sure what the foundation meant by the question. So I put it aside and simply wrote my thoughts of the whole proposal."

The draft guidelines may be seen on NSF's home page—<http://www.nsf.gov>—and e-mailed comments are encouraged. "I would be surprised," says Lane, "if we don't get suggestions for completely different criteria, and if we don't make some changes."