Browne Leaves Los Alamos Directorship, Perplexed but Resigned

As LANL director, John Browne had weathered Wen Ho Lee, wildfires, and lost computer disks, but he couldn't satisfy DOE concerns over procurement card abuses at the lab and it cost him his job.

A day after his resignation as the director of Los Alamos National Laboratory took effect, physicist John Browne was back in the place he'd been five years earlier—the Los Alamos Neutron Science Center. The laboratory's particle accelerator is housed there and Browne, who ran the center before becoming LANL director, was working out plans to "reengage in some of the work I did over 20 years ago in looking at nuclear reactions on nuclei of interest to nuclear astrophysics and nuclear weapons physics."

Returning to the physics lab wasn't in his plans. As recently as mid-December Browne was dealing with yet another in what has been a seemingly endless string of controversies and crises that have marked his five-year tenure as director. The FBI, two congressional committees, and US Department of Energy (DOE) officials were investigating charges that there was widespread abuse of procurement card purchases, as well as theft of computers and other property, by Los Alamos employees. Two former police chiefs hired by the lab to investigate theft claimed the losses totaled an estimated $3 million in equipment, including more than 260 computers.

LANL

Browne

The two investigators, Glen Walp and Steve Doran, said there was a "culture of theft" at the lab. But after internal documents were anonymously leaked to the press, the two were fired. Browne says for good reason, because the pair took on the roles of internal policemen, not just investigators, and were disruptive. Because Walp and Doran have filed a lawsuit, Browne was reluctant to discuss in detail what happened.

Walp and Doran charged that their firing was part of a management cover-up, and their claim attracted the attention of DOE Secretary Spencer Abraham. In December, citing an apparent "systemic management failure" at the lab, Abraham made clear that he no longer had confidence in Browne and pushed the director and University of California officials who manage the lab for change. On 23 December, in a phone conversation with UC President Richard Atkinson, Browne offered to resign, effective 6 January. Atkinson accepted his offer.

Along with Browne, Joseph Salgado, the laboratory's deputy director, stepped down. Atkinson quickly named George "Pete" Nanos, a physicist, retired vice admiral in the US Navy, and associate director of Los Alamos's Threat Reduction Directorate, as the interim director.

Browne said in an interview with PHYSICS TODAY, that he was "disappointed" in how his directorship ended and also a bit perplexed about why it happened. The procurement card abuses were egregious, Browne said, but an independent group that included former federal inspectors general conducted an investigation that Browne chartered last August and concluded the problems were not nearly as serious as critics claimed.

A political reaction

"I tell you I can't put my finger on why," Browne said of the pressure for him to step down. "Some people have said I'm just naïve. Maybe I am, but the reaction [to the theft and cover-up charges] did seem to be a more political reaction . . . than a reaction to facts. From a business perspective, our procurement card problems are nothing like the procurement card problems were [last year] in the Department of Defense."

The Pentagon's argument at the time, Browne said, was that making purchases through procurement cards saved a lot of money, despite some abuses. "We have the same data," he said. "We would say that we saved between $1 and $2 million per year using the cards. When I compare that to potential losses of a few thousand dollars [due to abuse of the cards], I think that, while I don't accept losses of taxpayers' money, you're always managing risk–benefit when you run a big business or a big laboratory with a $2 billion annual budget."

Although Abraham's statements have focused on issues related to the card abuses, Browne agreed with some observers that it was likely the string of crises plaguing his administration that triggered Abraham's action. In his public comments after his resignation was announced, Browne said that, since he became director in 1997, he has felt like he was constantly trying to put up new sails in a squall.

"First, I had to settle a lawsuit from the previous administration that was for some people who were let go in 1995," he said. Those were reduction-in-force layoffs due to budget cuts, he said, but "it took me the first six or seven months of my tenure as director to settle that lawsuit."

With the suit settled Browne turned his attention back to modernizing the business, safety, and operating systems at the lab. All of the systems were antiquated thanks to cuts in funding after the cold war, he said. "In 1997, when I came in, we could see [funding problems] turning around with the stockpile stewardship program coming in. Then came Wen Ho Lee."

Lee, a lab scientist who specialized in developing computer codes related to nuclear systems, was fired by Browne in 1999 for transferring massive amounts of classified data to unclassified computer systems. Lee was indicted on 59 federal felony counts related to spying for China and jailed for nine months, but the spy case against him eventually collapsed. Lee pleaded guilty to one count of mishandling sensitive material. During congressional hearings, the Los Alamos management was severely criticized for lax security and weak management in the Lee affair.

"With Wen Ho Lee, the focus was on things he had done in the early nineties," Browne said. "All of that stuff that was reported about him downloading computer codes and computer information was done earlier."

No matter when it was done, Browne said, Lee's actions were the worst security violations he had ever seen.

In May 2000, as Browne was riding out the Lee storm, two computer hard drives belonging to a group of nuclear weapons scientists were discovered to be missing. The disks weren't just lost, they had disappeared from a vault during an evacuation caused by the raging Cerro Grande wildfire—a blaze, Browne notes, that was started by the National Park Service. The disks suddenly reappeared behind a copy machine at the lab about six weeks later. More congressional criticism was heaped on the lab for bad security.

Sails in a storm

"You can see the picture I'm painting," Browne said. "While we are trying to make all of these business improvements, the feeling really is like you put up the sail, and it gets ripped down. I don't want to make excuses. I mean, the job is the job is the job."

Browne said several times during the interview that the claims that more than $3 million worth of property was stolen or missing and that he was trying to cover up the problem, were wrong. "While some property has been reported stolen, the data do not support widespread theft or a 'culture of theft' as alleged."

With respect to the cover-up charges, Browne noted that LANL makes regular missing property reports to the DOE inspector general and the FBI. He said he was open about the procurement card problem and ordered an external review to resolve it. That review, conducted by former DOE Inspector General John Layton and former Department of Labor Inspector General Charles Masten, found that in addition to about $2800 in fraudulent charges, "there was, inside our computer system, $3.7 million worth of unreconciled costs from the banks," Browne said.

"When we looked more deeply, $2.7 of the $3.7 million actually was reconciled, it just had not been entered into the database yet." About a million in unreconciled costs remained, "so I put people to work to see what they could find that could not be reconciled. After a few weeks of pretty intensive work, we found that those numbers dropped down to what I would consider normal business flow in and out." The Layton report supported his numbers, he said, and "did not find widespread abuse of the purchase card system."

Part of the problem with the charges of abuse and theft, Browne said, is that "people are using numbers without understanding the numbers." But when he tried to explain to outside officials the details of what was going on with the procurement card auditing, he said, "everybody's eyes glazed over. It didn't have anything to do with the amount of money anymore. It had to do with the fact that they had lost confidence in our ability to manage. So that is what finally drove me to say, you know, it's time for somebody else to try and take the next step in improving performance here."

"There was a series of events," Browne concluded. "Whether they are of my making or not, it doesn't matter. It's kind of like the commander whose boat is run up on the shore by a junior officer. The commander still gets fired."

In the days after Browne resigned, the shakeups continued at Los Alamos. The two top managers of the lab's security system were reassigned to "nonmanagement positions." The head of Los Alamos's auditing office was also reassigned.

As the staff was being reshuffled, DOE was beginning an assessment of UC's ability to manage the lab. Abraham said he wasn't confident that the university should continue managing Los Alamos and asked for a full evaluation by 30 April. The lab contract could go to the University of Texas, which expressed interest in running the lab in 2001, or to the Battelle Corp, the Ohio company that runs Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee and is a partner with the State University of New York at Stony Brook in operating Brookhaven National Laboratory in New York.

Jim Dawson

Younger Speaks From the Frontline of Defense

New weapons can be built in record time to defend against terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, says Stephen Younger, the military's top physicist.

Ten days before the events of 11 September 2001, Stephen Younger arrived in Washington, DC, to replace Jay Davis as the director of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency. DTRA, at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, is part of the Department of Defense and serves as the US hub for developing strategies against weapons of mass destruction. "I wasn't surprised to be offered the job, because the administration was very kind in discussions of how I might be able to come to Washington," says Younger, who was previously the senior associate director in charge of the stockpile stewardship program at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. "We talked about several types of positions, and, after some discussion, this was the one that seemed the best fit."


DTRA

Younger

The fit seems apt: In 2000, Younger published his widely disseminated unclassified paper, *Nuclear Weapons in the Twenty-First Century*, to stimulate long-term thinking about the strategic capability of the US nuclear stockpile in light of the end of the cold war. DTRA's mandate involves working with all branches of government concerned with weapons of mass destruction, and a range of activities from arms control to arms development. The agency carries out arms control both by monitoring international treaties and through a program that involves the cooperative destruction of weapons of mass destruction. Arms development consists mainly of developing weapons to destroy or neutralize hostile weapons of mass destruction before they can be used against the US and providing combat support to the US military.

"Our job is to make the world safer by reducing the threat of weapons of mass destruction," says Younger. "How can you do that most effectively? We look at the grades of threat, then we identify the best technologies and systems for reducing that threat by working with industry, academia, and the national laboratories." DTRA doesn't have a laboratory system of its own, so the agency has "no obligation to take care of our own researchers," Younger says. "Our job is to find the best product for our customers." Most of the weapons DTRA conceives take from one month to two years to design and build.

Younger, who has a PhD in theoretical physics from the University of Maryland, College Park, started his career in the 1970s at the National Bureau of Standards (now NIST). In 1982, he joined Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, where he devel-