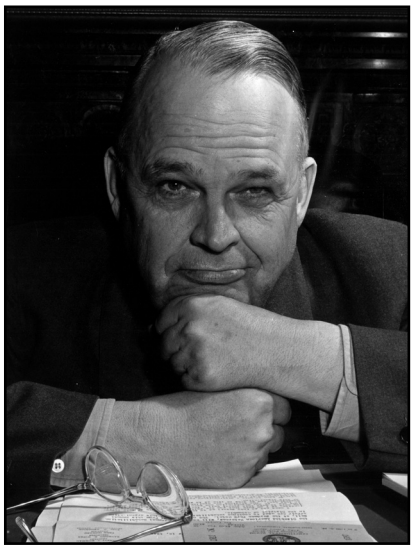
SNAPSHOT OF A SHIFTING SENATE: SENATOR ROBERT KERR AND SPACE, 1961-1962

By Wendy N. Whitman Cobb

The dawn of the Kennedy administration in 1961 signaled new starts for many individuals, not least for President John F. Kennedy and his vice president, Lyndon B. Johnson. The new administration also brought good news for many government programs, including human spaceflight operated by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), which received a presidential boost with Kennedy's 25 May 1961 speech to Congress calling for a lunar landing by the end of the decade. The same year also saw Senator Robert Kerr, Democrat of Oklahoma, ascend to the chairmanship of the Senate Aeronautical and Space Sciences Committee that had oversight authority for the space program and NASA. Even prior to his assumption of the chairmanship, Kerr was called "the uncrowned King of the Senate," owing to his influence and position in a chamber that prioritized seniority. Other senators recognized this prestige in the saying, "What Kerr wants, Kennedy gets."[1] Given Kerr's position, reputation, power, and strong advocacy for the state of Oklahoma, the senator was in an exceptional position to benefit from a growing space program.

Recognizing the value of key members of Congress, NASA has been historically adept at handing out contracts and NASA installations to key members of Congress who determined NASA's future and budget. While this certainly included Kerr as chairman of the Senate space committee, there are no NASA centers in Oklahoma, nor did Oklahoma see the benefit of large amounts of pork flowing into the state from the space agency. While Kerr was certainly influential in bringing home some NASA money at the margins, why was he not as successful as others, including the chairman of the House Appropriations subcommittee that oversaw NASA, Albert Thomas, who was able to claim the Johnson Space Center adjacent to his district?[2] Why wasn't Senator Kerr, known for his pork barrel abilities on behalf of Oklahoma, able to claim a larger portion of the NASA money for his home state?

The obvious answer that comes to mind is, first and foremost, that Robert Kerr died on 1 January 1963 and was unable to see any of his efforts come to fruition. But this neglects the fact that many of the prime NASA contracts and offices had already been given out. The counterfactual, what would have Oklahoma gotten if Kerr had lived, is interesting to ponder, but it neglects the setting in which NASA politicking was taking place. Congressional elections starting with those in the 1950s were sending new blood to Congress, which led to massive congressional reforms in the ensuing decades. The norms and behaviors of the Senate were evolving while the House and its constitutional responsibility of beginning the appropriations process led NASA to focus more strongly on members of that chamber rather than the Senate. The experience of Senator Robert Kerr and his ability, or lack thereof, to secure space pork for Oklahoma has less to do with his death than the state of the Congress at the dawn of the congressional reform period.



Robert S. Kerr Collection, Photographs, Item 1162, Carl Albert Center Congressional and Political Collections, University of Oklahoma.

This research explores the Kerr experience as the product of changing times in the development of the U.S. Senate and U.S. Congress, more broadly. The first section lays out Kerr's reputation as a strong advocate for the state of Oklahoma and how he further sought similar benefits for Oklahomans at the beginning of the Space Age. It draws not only on secondary research but primary documents from Senator Kerr's archives at the University of Oklahoma. The next section then places this experience within the larger institutional context of a shifting Senate and changing House. Finally, I highlight how the mixed legacy of Robert Kerr on the space program provides a glimpse into the politics not only of NASA but into the institutional develop-

ment of the Congress at a pivotal moment not just in our country's history but in the history of Congress as a living body.

Robert S. Kerr: Space Advocate and Influencer

A native-born Oklahoman, Robert S. Kerr pursued a life in law and business prior to his political career. In 1929, he founded an oil drilling company that became known as Kerr-McGee by the end of World War II. Parlaying his business success to government, he first began supporting Oklahoma Democrats financially in the 1930s and went on to become governor of Oklahoma in 1943. Following one term in office, Kerr was elected to the United States Senate in 1948.

Kerr took to his work in the Senate, making it a priority to secure benefits for Oklahoma in the form of pork barrel spending. In addition to his "uncrowned King of the Senate" moniker, Kerr was also called the "King of Pork."[3] "Kerr's Senate career…orbited around bringing money, jobs, and resources to Oklahoma. His slogan, 'Land, Wood, and Water' represented his commitment to conserving the natural resources vital to Oklahoma's economy, and supporting businesses that thrived on them."[4] Kerr himself lauded the public money he brought back to Oklahoma, stating in 1962, "Let the Washington wags make their jokes about the federal 'pork barrel,' but the Oklahoma Congressional delegation is happy to be 'bringing home the bacon.' We know that our projects are a sound investment in Oklahoma's economic strength and growth."[5]

Being in the Senate of the 1950s brought Kerr into close contact with other political luminaries including John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. Kerr worked so closely with Johnson that in September of 1959, Johnson, then the Senate Majority Leader, wrote Kerr a letter in part saying: "It has been a difficult session, but difficult sessions produce big men; and I want you to know how deeply grateful I am to you for your strength, your counsel and your dedication—all of which amounted to a tower of helpfulness as far as I was concerned."[6]

The launch of *Sputnik* in 1957 changed many things in political and national security circles but did not touch Kerr directly. While there are instances of letters from constituents between 1958 and 1960 that expressed concern with the burgeoning Space Race, Kerr was not at all active in promoting the space program at the time.[7] It was only with his ascension to the Senate Space Committee, that Kerr became a strong supporter of space not only in terms of national security but economic benefits, education, and spin-offs. His passion is obvious in an October 1961 speech to the Rotary Club in Oklahoma City titled "Our Place in Space" to which he brought a model of the *Ranger* probe designed to fly to the Moon. Kerr was quite detailed in explaining the spacecraft to his audience not only through the model but a series of slides which described the operation of *Ranger* and the experiments to be performed by it.[8] Further, he made space the topic of his 1961 Law Day speech at the University of Oklahoma and emphasized the role of education and the ability of the space program to enhance it in a speech to teachers in Edmond, Oklahoma, in 1962.[9] In their analysis of Kerr's papers, Hayden et al. determine that Kerr relied on these more "parochial" concerns to "sell" space to Oklahomans and others.[10]

Given Kerr's emerging passion for the space program and his closeness with Johnson, Kerr became the personal choice of Johnson to succeed him as chair of the Senate Space Committee. This might have seemed a natural move, but there was nothing traditional about it given the norms of the Senate at the time to follow seniority in appointing committee chairmen. Historian and political scientist John Logsdon wrote that in making Kerr chair, other senators with more seniority were passed over including Senator Clinton Anderson of New Mexico.[11] Both Kerr and Johnson convinced Anderson to take the chairmanship of the Interior Committee to make way for Kerr on the Space Committee. Logsdon further argued that: "his friendship with Lyndon Johnson and his stature as a leading senator were his [Kerr's] prime qualifications for chairmanship. In Kerr, Johnson knew he had a close and powerful ally to help him push the new administration to propose a larger space program and who would be sympathetic to the political (and pork-barrel) uses of that larger program."[12]

The significance of Kerr's appointment was not lost on either Kerr or his home state. Upon taking the chair, Kerr released a statement saying:

> As the new Chairman of the Senate Space Committee, I am going to do all I can to see that Oklahoma grasps her opportunities in this exciting new program. Her stellar role, of course, will be commensurate with her great capacities, and compatible with the requirements of the national interest. In this pursuit, I am expanding

my basic slogan to "Land, Wood, Water & SPACE."[13]

Kerr's addition of space to his personal motto signaled his willingness to use the space program not only to promote national interests but to advance Oklahoma's interests as well, something a radio editorial echoed: "The *Tulsa World* cannot recall any time in the past when a more important and sensitive governmental position has been [*sic*] awarded a representative from Oklahoma in either House of the Congress."[14]

One of Kerr's first achievements as chair of the Space Committee was the appointment of James Webb as NASA administrator. Webb was not an unknown entity to Kerr or to Oklahoma, having previously worked for Kerr-McGee during the 1950s. However, getting Webb to accept the position was not easy. "Webb turned down President Kennedy's first request that he head NASA… However, President Kennedy persisted partly because of the interest of Vice President Johnson and Senator Robert Kerr."[15] In a statement made at the time of Webb's appointment, Kerr noted that Webb had been an "adopted Oklahoman since 1953" and "helped organize and served as president of Oklahoma's Frontiers of Science Foundation."[16] In tying James Webb not only to himself but to Oklahoma, Kerr was highlighting the potential benefits that could accrue to Oklahoma from his own position in the Senate and Webb's position at NASA. The feeling was mutual as Webb recognized Kerr as "a protector of NASA" in the Senate. Webb's biographer, W. Henry Lambright, noted that shortly after Webb was announced as NASA's next administrator, Webb traveled to "Oklahoma to help Kerr stage a meeting on space policy with various local and regional leaders so the folks back home could see" Kerr's position as chair of the Senate space committee.[17]

Upon becoming chair of the Space Committee, Kerr immediately began advocating on behalf of Oklahoma businesses seeking NASA work. Among Kerr's correspondence can be found letters from Oklahoma businesses like Well Surveys looking for work on a lunar drilling rig, Chemical Contour Corporation seeking a chemical plant in Tulsa, the Rogue Companies pursuing engineering work, Nelson and Walker Marketing Research Analysis, and even the University of Oklahoma.[18] Shortly into his tenure, Kerr celebrated the First National Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Space that was held in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in May of 1961. As part of the conference, Kerr's committee staff "undertook a research project to determine how Oklahomans could increase their participation in the national effort."[19] In his own speech at the Tulsa conference, titled "Opportunities for Industry and Education in the Space Age," Kerr argued that Tulsa was an ideal site for such a conference based on Oklahoma's rapid development of natural resources, implicitly suggesting that Oklahoma was well placed to benefit.[20]

Robert S. Kerr Collection, Photographs, Item 1162, Carl Albert Center Congressional and Political Collections, University of Oklahoma.

Kerr's speeches throughout 1961 and 1962 continued to highlight the work of Oklahomans in the space program. At his Tulsa speech, he noted technological work being done at the University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma State University, and Tinker Air Force Base.[21] In "Our Place in Space," Kerr cited a number of examples of Oklahoma space work, including "the expansion of the Dorsett Electronics operation at Norman and the establishment of important new plants in Oklahoma by such large industrial firms as Thiokol at Shawnee and Dupont at Tulsa. Some of the first and most important scientific packages lofted into space were built by our scientists at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater."[22]

Kerr's constituents in Oklahoma were similarly interested in taking advantage of the benefits NASA could provide. Kerr received letters from people and organizations throughout Oklahoma expressing interest in participating in the space program or asking for help

securing NASA contracts including the Chambers of Commerce of Ponca City and El Reno and the editor of the *Ada Evening News*.[23] A telegram on 9 June 1961, from a constituent working at Nelson Electric Manufacturing is reflective of other constituent letters: "HOPE YOU ARE WORKING TO GET 60 MILLION DOLLAR NASA SPACE LABORATORY FOR MOON LAUNCH DEVELOPMENT LOCATED IN OKLAHOMA."[24]

The period of June 1961was important for NASA as it came right after President Kennedy's speech to the Congress calling for a Moon landing by the end of the 1960s. As chair of the Space Committee, Kerr was surely aware of competition for NASA contracts including the Manned Spaceflight Center (now Johnson Space Center), which went to Houston. In response to another letter from the Ada Chamber of Commerce, Kerr wrote on 14 June that: "You can be sure that we will do everything we can to see that the decision will not be made until all factors and locations with which we are most familiar are given full consideration. I am sure that you fellows in Ada know that we are doing everything possible here to see that Ada gets the best possible opportunity to participate in any such undertaking."[25]

Along with Kerr and his constituents in Oklahoma, NASA also recognized how politically important the designating of contracts could be. In terms of responding to congressional requests, "members of Congress who serve on NASA committees [were] generally afforded more positive treatment" with the House Committee on Science and Astronautics faring "especially well."[26] With regards to contracts, from the beginning, NASA "demonstrated a good deal of political shrewdness in distributing space largesse to assure maximum political return...But where possible, the plums went to the suitable sites that would bring the best congressional dividends."[27] In 1962, journalist Daniel S. Greenberg noted that a good many NASA sites were in the South to help "win the favor of a large bloc of congressmen who might tend to support a call for economy." Even those members of Congress who were not in key positions like Kerr received NASA attention, including Senator Edward Kennedy in 1963 who sought an electronics center for Boston.[28] Although Senator Kennedy clearly had a close relationship with the Kennedy administration, the example is all the more significant given that the center would close in 1970 despite the growth of NASA's electronics research program.[29] To succeed in space, NASA needed the support of key congressmen and included political calculations in their contracting decisions.

Given Kerr's advocacy for the state of Oklahoma in his speeches and letters and NASA's demonstrated consideration of political interest, how successful was the senator in securing NASA contracts for the state during this period? Kerr's position as chair of the Senate Space Committee and NASA's proclivity to pay attention to its minders in Congress would all but guarantee Oklahoma's success in securing NASA contracts. In addition to the DuPont chemical plant built in Tulsa and education and engineering contracts for the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University (including $41,000 to the Amateur Rocketeers of America and OU for a nationwide youth education program), Kerr also cited the establishment of a Melpar electronic facility in Oklahoma City to work on aeronautics and space contracts.[30] Undoubtedly, though, the biggest coup Kerr claimed was the building of a facility for North American Aviation in Tulsa, which would work on the Apollo spacecraft and the Saturn V rocket. An editorial in the *Oklahoma City Times* on 17 February 1962, highlights the importance of the announcement:

> The location of the Apollo spacecraft manufacturing project at Tulsa is a major breakthrough for all of Oklahoma, quite as much as for Tulsa itself. It is a reminder that our congressional delegation is capable of swinging space age business our way. Sen. Robert Kerr, for one, promised to do so in his capacity as chairman of the powerful senate [*sic]* space committee. Undoubtedly any other state would have given its eye teeth to land this project and some, such as California, had many talking points in terms of facilities.[31]

The North American facility represented a major investment in Oklahoma with North American utilizing 270,000 square feet of a previously built Air Force plant with an option on 300 acres of land nearby.[32] The company's Space and Information Systems Division set up operations in this Tulsa facility, contributing to work on the Apollo Service Module structure, the Saturn II upper stage booster, and Saturn V components including manufacturing of the Lunar Module adapter, instrument unit, forward skirt, and systems tunnel, among others.[33] Author Bill Moore wrote that in addition to the significant investment from North American,

other small companies moved to Tulsa in anticipation of performing subcontracted work.[34] Following Kerr's death, Oklahoma's other senator, J. Howard Edmondson, made a concerted effort to keep companies like North American in the state. The North American facility remained in Oklahoma, later contributing to both the Space Shuttle and International Space Station programs.[35]

While the North American facility was certainly something to boast about, Kerr's success in securing space pork for Oklahoma compares little to what other members of Congress secured for their districts. What explains this rather disappointing outcome to an otherwise promising pork barrel situation?

Space and Congress: Changing Institutions Matter

There are four primary hypotheses to explain Kerr's lack of space pork: Kerr's death, the state of Oklahoma's industries and in particular the lack of companies and facilities able to take on space contracts, the dominance of the House in appropriations matters, and the evolving Senate. I will take up each of these hypotheses in turn, leaving Kerr's death for last.

Lack of Industrial Capacity in Oklahoma

While pork barrel politics were discussed above regarding decisions about the delegation of contracts and NASA installations, other factors do go into such contracting decisions. The reduction of federal spending and concomitant increases in efficiency often drive contracting decisions.[36] This argument reflects the idea that "the government should buy from the supplier able to produce the best balance of quality, cost, and time factors regardless of geographic location."[37] These variables certainly matter, but other political elements have also been correlated to the contracting process. Political scientists Karl Derouen and Uk Heo find that presidents tend to use the defense contracting cycle to counteract low approval ratings, thus granting contracts in areas that tend to be less supportive of the president.[38] Campaign donations have even been linked to the awarding of federal contracts.[39]

Given the period, however, and the task ahead of them, NASA's facilities requirements in many cases were particular and overrode sheer politics. For those installations that would be launching test rockets and eventually the rockets that would send men into space, not every geographical location could be considered. A testing site had previously been established at Wallops Island on the Virginia coastline by the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA), the forerunner to NASA, and when NASA had to decide where it should launch its rockets, its choice was restricted by the requirements of being on the coast and nearer to the equator, which reduces the energy a rocket requires to get to orbit. Florida's Cape Canaveral became the logical choice based on those requirements and the fact that the U.S. Air Force already had an established launch site nearby. Huntsville, Alabama, quickly became the home to NASA's rocket design team as Wernher von Braun, the German rocket engineer, and his team were already located at the Army's Ballistic Missile Agency there when it was transferred to NASA. Beyond these considerations, however, other NASA facilities and contracts could be given to any location or company that was able to fulfill the contracted work, especially since what was being asked was of an entirely new adventure.

Table 1: Relative Position of States on Key Resources in Research and Development (reprinted in and excerpted from Murphy 1969).

R&D Funds	Oklahoma's Rank
Industrial Employee	35
Scientist in Universities	36
Advanced Degrees Conferred	44
Per Scientist	37
Per $1,000 Federal Tax Contribution	40
Per Capita	31
Dollar Distribution	36
Per Student Enrolled in Universities	39

Oklahoma's geography did limit its ability, in a sense, to attract NASA's interest. Besides its rather open air space, something the Oklahoma Space Industry Development Authority touts to this day, there was little else to recommend it. Oklahoma's industrial capacity remained as the major selling point to secure NASA contracts. The Midwest in general, however, did not have such capacity. In fact, in the mid-1960s, many in the Midwest were complaining of a "brain drain" to the coasts in terms of federal research and development funds that were consistently going everywhere but the Midwest.[40] While Oklahoma is considered by the Census Bureau to be in the West South Central region of the United

Table 2: Expenditures ($M)
Plant and Equipment in Industruies and Subindustries Involved in Research and Development, 1963.

Region	Electronics	Communi-cations	Transpor-tation	Aircraft	Instruments	Scientific Industry
New England	60.8	18.3	48.8	35.9	32.5	2.2
Mid-Atlantic	179.5	47.4	122.9	45.0	89.6	2.2
Great Lakes	207.9	37.0	489.8	32.4	37.8	---
Plains	28.6	11.7	38.3	25.9	6.2	---
South Atlantic	48.6	19.8	45.6	12.5	7.7	
East South-Central	24.8	1.4	19.3	1.2		
West South-Central	23.1	12.2	31.2	13.9	1.6	
Mountain	20.8	1.5	13.5	10.8	1.2	0.8
Pacific	107.6	44.3	182.4	116.1	13.4	1.2

States, statistics published in the *Congressional Record* in 1965 demonstrate the lower ranking of Oklahoma with respect to federal research dollars on several metrics that put it in line with the rest of the Midwest (Table 1). If there were no companies or even universities in Oklahoma able to perform the work that NASA needed, it would have been difficult indeed to secure the lucrative space contracts.

Thomas Murphy's 1969 paper on the geographical distribution of federal research funds paints a stark picture of the state of the industrial complex across the United States in the 1960s. In data from the U.S. Department of Commerce (Murphy's Table 4, here reprinted as Table 2), the West South-Central region ranks eighth out of nine in electronics expenditures, sixth out of nine in communications expenditures, sixth out of nine in aircraft expenditures, and seventh out of nine in instrument expenditures. This poor showing in terms of industry reinforces the fact that Oklahoma, as part of a region that includes Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas, had little industrial base to absorb high-dollar NASA work.

A final element supporting this argument is Murphy's analysis of NASA contracts over $5 million awarded between May 1961 and June 1966. His data showed that only 8.3 percent of the requests for proposals, 10.3 percent of the bids made, and 10 percent of the contracts awarded came from the West South-Central region. While Murphy does not break down these numbers by state, it should be noted that Texas, considered to be in the same region as Oklahoma, probably secured a significant number of those contracts as it was becoming home to the Manned Spaceflight Center in Houston.

Murphy's research showed that Oklahoma and the West South-Central region in general had little to recommend itself to NASA, but it did not entirely rule out the fact that contractors in other states had the ability and the option to relocate some of their contract work to Oklahoma as North American Aviation did with its work for the Apollo spacecraft. In fact, many of the major contractors for the human spaceflight programs of the 1960s distributed their work around the country and even subcontracted to other vendors. Indeed, North American Aviation's motivation for building a plant in Tulsa could have been to court the favor of an influential senator like Kerr who had a say in the authorization of NASA programs. This follows the same logic of more modern research relating campaign donations to the distribution of federal contracts.

This argument, however, forgets that there did appear, at least in the constituent correspondence of Senator Kerr, several Oklahoma businesses that were eager to get into the NASA contract game. In a letter from NASA to just such a businessman in Oklahoma, the assistant to the NASA administrator writes, "Senator Robert S. Kerr has expressed his interest to us in your participation in the competition to provide a lunar drilling rig for our project *Surveyor*."[41] The letter demonstrates

Kerr's advocacy for such businesses along with the fact that such Oklahomans were taken seriously enough by NASA to warrant such a reply. And what Oklahoma lacked in electronics, aircraft, and instrument capacity, it made up for in other vital areas such as drilling and oil and gas, something Kerr himself was familiar with. In fact, NASA continues to contract out to Oklahoma-based companies today for liquid natural gas to the tune of over $1 million, and $19.8 million to Wichita Tribal Enterprises for various support services in fiscal year 2016 alone. Oklahoma did not necessarily have the traditional industrial base that NASA needed, but it did have other technical capabilities to recommend its services to NASA.

Balance of Power: House versus Senate

While the Constitution never mentions a role for government in research, development, science, or technical areas, its key provisions nonetheless affect both policymaking and appropriating. In addition to the power to legislate, the Congress is also granted oversight authority over the executive branch. Perhaps most significantly, the Constitution specifically grants the House of Representatives the privilege of initiating all money bills. This process was important to NASA as it received large appropriations which peaked at $43.5 billion dollars (2014 constant dollars) in 1965. However, the authorization and appropriation process in Congress during the early 1960s was quite "decentralized and uncoordinated."[42] Among the committees with a say in the process were the "House and Senate Armed Services Committees, the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, the Senate Aeronautical and Space Sciences Committee, the House Committee on Science and Astronautics, and the House and the Senate Appropriations Committees."[43] And unlike the Congress of today, the Congress of the 1950s and 1960s, generally known as the "Textbook Congress," featured a power structure that vested much of the policy power in the chairs of these committees who received their positions based on seniority. While members of the committees most certainly communicated among themselves, there were no coordinating bodies or authorities such as congressional leadership or the Budget Committees that exist in both the House and Senate today. The NASA of the early 1960s, then, needed to be concerned about the attitudes and views of the members of these committees and particularly their chairs.

Given that the House must initiate money bills, NASA might have prioritized House chairs over their Senate counterparts. In fact, previous research examining the role of the House and the Senate in policymaking by NASA suggests that the House tended to be the more active chamber during this period of history. Whitman Cobb found that between 1959 and 1965, the House held more hearings regarding NASA than the Senate.[44] Murphy's analysis of NASA's congressional liaison showed that NASA typically responded to the requests and questions from the House Committee on Science and Astronautics better than other stakeholder groups.[45] Additionally, Murphy found that "Members of the House Committee on Science and Astronautics took the most trips" to NASA installations and facilities in 1965 while only eight senators took similar trips.[46]

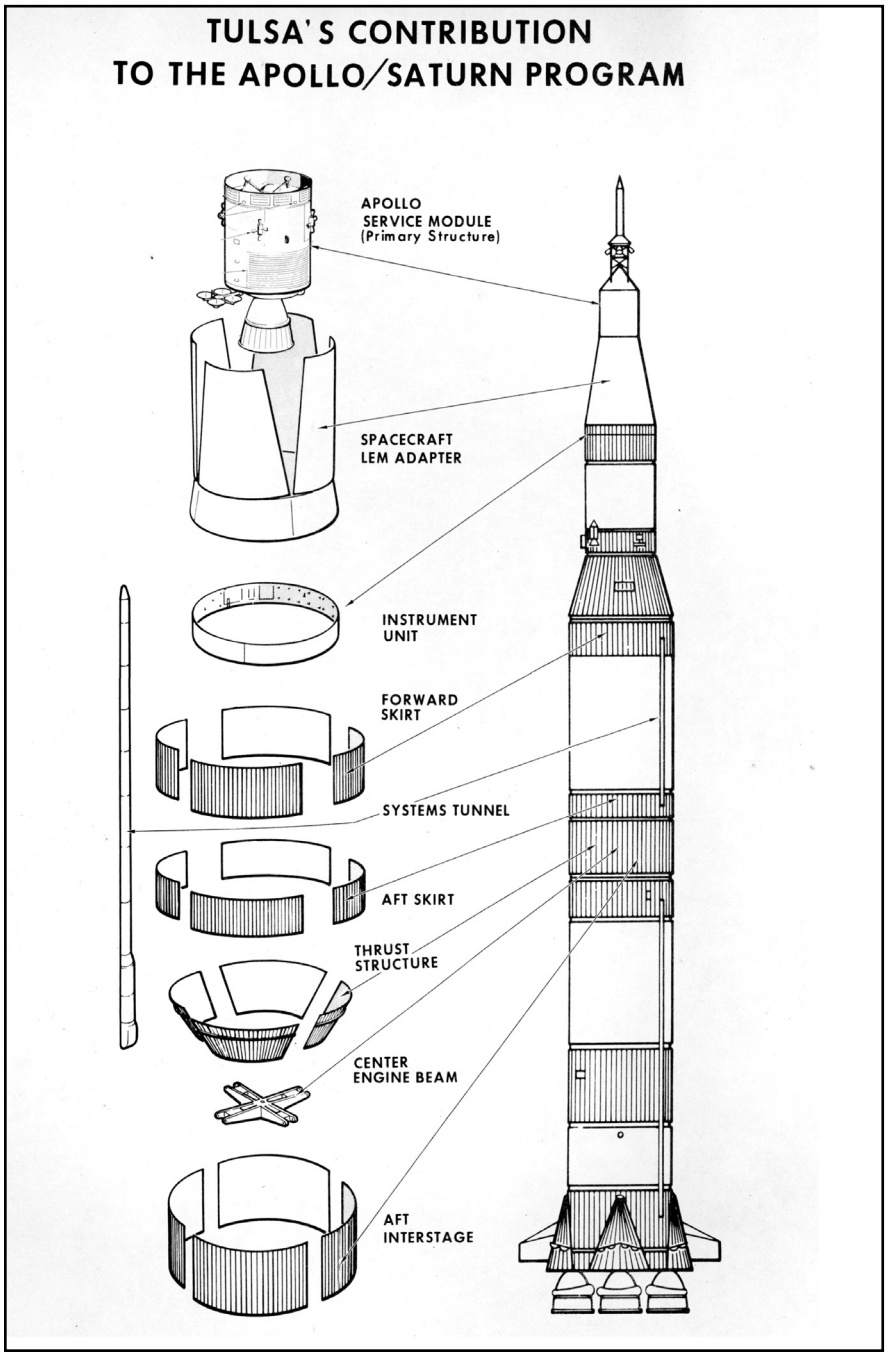
With regards to NASA pork, members of Congress involved with the appropriations committees appeared to have fared better than members of authorizing committees. The decision to locate the Manned Spaceflight Center, now known as the Johnson Space Center, in Houston, Texas, seemingly made to appease Lyndon Johnson himself, also pleased Representative Albert Thomas, chair of the House appropriations subcommittee with jurisdiction over NASA, whose district sat adjacent to the site.[47] Likewise, Senator John Stennis of Mississippi was chair of the Senate appropriations subcommittee with NASA responsibility and later secured NASA's rocket test facility for his home state, today called the Stennis Space Center. Murphy too noted the differences in response between the House and the Senate by the NASA congressional liaison and explained it this way:

> The liaison office was less effective in the Senate where it was harder to secure access to busy senators and where the priorities issue and Vietnam had their most telling effect.
>
> Until 1965, the Senate Committee on Aeronautical and Space Sciences and the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Independent Offices tended to play the role of an appeals agency for NASA and consistently offered NASA more funds than the House counterparts.[48]

Considering Kerr's position as chair of an authorization committee rather than appropriating committee, NASA might not have felt the need to cater to Kerr as much as those members of Congress with

direct power of the purse over the agency. If this is the case, it indicates the strategic thinking of executive agencies and bureaucracies as they seek to make friends in the Congress and is an important factor to consider in congressional policy-making analyses.

One final note regarding the role of the House in determining space policy: There was indeed an Oklahoman in the House of Representatives who was well-placed at the time to exert influence through the House Space Committee: Carl Albert. Having been elected to the House for the first time in 1947, Albert would have had the requisite seniority to be empowered, but he did not gain a seat on the House Space Committee until 1963 and in 1961, he had been selected House Majority Leader. These factors would have given him less power on space directly and split his time and attention to other issues of the day on the democratic agenda. Moore's chronicle of Oklahomans active in the history of the space program actually lacks a subsection on Albert and his contributions to the space program in Oklahoma, reflecting his lack of influence.[49]



Courtesy: Oklahoma Historical Society

The Changing Norms of the Senate

The Senate of the late 1950s and early 1960s was a shifting one, moving from the era of the Textbook Congress and beginning the slow transformation to the more partisan, party-centered Senate that we see today. Barbara Sinclair has detailed many of these changes, describing the 1950s Senate as "a clubby, inward-looking body governed by constraining norms; influence was relatively unequally distributed and centered in strong committees and their senior leaders... The typical senator of the 1950s was a specialist who concentrated on the issues that came before his committees."[50] Elsewhere, she adds that a typical senator was "deferential to his seniors, loyal to the institution, and highly restrained in the use of the powers Senate rules confer upon the individual."[51] In sum, the Senate was a "highly compartmentalized legislative chamber" that placed importance on norms such as seniority, apprenticeship, and specialization.[52]

These norms and behaviors led to a decision-making structure in the Senate that was highly committee centered and featured reciprocity among senators. Sinclair describes it this way:

> Senate decision making in the 1950s was committee-centered. The committee system

> specified by the Senate rules, combined with a workload large enough to make such a division of labor necessary, guarantees that Senate committees will be important arenas of legislative decision making. In the 1950s, Senate committees were not simply important, they were highly autonomous. The norms of specialization and reciprocity reinforced committees' advantaged position in decision making by defining as illegitimate most behavior by nonmembers aimed at influencing a committee's legislation. Senators were admonished to confine their time and attention to matters coming before their committees, to defer to the expertise of senior committee members on other legislation, to be highly restrained in using floor time for any purpose, and certainly to refrain from offering amendments to legislation from committees on which they did not serve.[53]

Beginning in the mid- to late-1950s, however, elections began to send waves of more liberal Northern Democrats to both the House and the Senate. The ideological makeup of the new class of senators also differed with the incoming Democrats' more liberal and progressive outlook.[54] These ideological differences between older, more conservative Democrats and their new, more liberal counterparts inevitably led to disagreements and changed the motivations for how senators were to behave. Younger, newer members resented the power of seniority that limited their ability to get involved in emerging issues such as the environment, women's rights, consumer protection, and Vietnam.[55] Instead of following Senate norms of apprenticeship and the development of specialization and expertise within their own committees, newer senators wanted greater and broader policy involvement. As they came to Washington and seized on new issues and the media limelight that came along with them, the new activist senators sought to change the Senate to empower them more broadly; the number of seats on high profile committees was increased, subcommittees were added, and staff became more widely available.[56] These changes also help explain why NASA's congressional liaison found working with and getting the attention of senators to be so difficult.

How might have these changes, which in retrospect appear revolutionary, have affected Kerr and his ability to secure major benefits for his state? Kerr, as part of the established Senate, had been indoctrinated in the traditional norms of seniority, apprenticeship, and reciprocity. His entire career represents his focus on land, water, and development benefits for Oklahomans. As chair of the Senate space committee, he was well-placed to direct legislation with little competition from others on the committee, let alone others in the Senate. However, the very norms of the Senate themselves (seniority) were overridden to allow Kerr to become chair of the committee in the first place. Further, Clinton Anderson, Kerr's successor as chair of the committee, although having been elected about the same time as Kerr, appears to have been sympathetic to the plight of the incoming liberal Democrats. John Walsh's contemporaneous report described Anderson as an "activist" who "generally votes with the Senate liberals and in the past year [1962] has shared their travails."[57] These efforts included attempts to change Senate filibuster rules, which was eventually accomplished in the 1970s. The liberal progressive movement symbolized by the new generation of senators soon came to grips with the budgetary implications of the space program. Prominently among these was Senator J. William Fulbright, who as early as 1963 began to criticize space spending from his perch as chair of the Foreign Relations committee.[58] Fulbright became more and more vocal in his anti-space agenda with his primary argument being that the money could be better spent on conditions on the ground in America. This argument is reflective of the larger liberal movement emerging in the early 1960s.

It seems, then, that at the very moment Kerr was attempting to operate in a more traditional senatorial manner, circumstances were shifting around him, some of which he benefitted from and some of which he did not. The progressive concern over space spending peaked in the mid-1960s; following 1965, NASA's annual appropriations began to fall precipitously despite the push to land a man on the Moon. It might well be the case that at the moment in which space spending seemed so secure, the early 1960s, criticism bubbling just beneath the surface might have limited what Kerr could and could not achieve. This factor combined with the dynamics of House and Senate relations and the lack of industrial base in Oklahoma to support a large space economy largely explain Kerr's lack of success at the pork barrel.

The Death of Senator Kerr

The above analysis includes multiple variables, but perhaps the

most parsimonious answer to the question of why Senator Kerr was not more successful was that he died just as NASA was coming into its own and his position was taken by others who were able to take advantage of a more mature contracting process at NASA. Following Kerr's death, General Electric, Melpar, Long-Temco-Vought, and Avco all expanded into Oklahoma to carry out their space contracts.[59] However, these expansions might have been previously predicated upon Kerr himself. Moore writes that in one instance, Kerr's successor to the Oklahoma Senate seat had to persuade a space contractor to stay in Oklahoma despite Kerr's death.[60]

This hypothesis is also partially borne out by the fact that Kerr's successor as Space Committee chair was Clinton Anderson. In an article detailing Anderson's ascension to the chair, Walsh noted that New Mexico had fared well in terms of federal money and that Anderson pointed "out in speeches that in federal spending per capita in the states, only one state, Virginia, stands higher than New Mexico."[61] And unlike Kerr, Anderson had long expressed interest in scientific and technical policy including patent policy and scientific information. In 1963, NASA established the White Sands Test Facility in New Mexico "to support the development of the Apollo spacecraft propulsion and power systems."[62] In fact, Anderson cited pressure from New Mexico newspapers in his decision to take the chair, who argued that "it was the duty of the senator from New Mexico to see to it that his state was not neglected" regarding NASA's ever-increasing budget.[63]

While New Mexico's geography and previous experience with nuclear and missile facilities might have facilitated the decision, it is notable that NASA's decision came in the first year of Senator Anderson's chair. That Anderson secured such a facility for his home state practically right away is a striking comparison to Kerr, who was unable to do so over two years as chair. Anderson's success reinforces the idea that Oklahoma's geography and industrial base simply did not suit NASA's needs but it also supports the changing state of the Senate. Walsh's analysis of the differences between the two senators is instructive and worthy of citation, noting that Anderson's style of leadership would likely be quite different from that of Kerr:

> By the time of his death on 1 January, Kerr had consolidated a power outside the regular leadership structure of the Senate which won him recognition in the press as "king of the Senate." Kerr was a self-made multimillionaire with great natural ability and energy, and he was a master of Senate geopolitics….
>
> As space committee chairman, Kerr was regarded as solicitous over private industry's role in the space program, but he seems to have left no deep personal mark on space policy…
>
> The Senator from New Mexico [Anderson], however, is not seen as successor to the Oklahoman as an independent force in the Senate, with a decisive influence on the total legislative program. At the same time, Anderson, whose activities have a narrower focus, may well give the Senate greater influence on space policy."[64]

Walsh's analysis suggests that Anderson was a different type of senator than Kerr. Walsh later noted in his piece that "Anderson is likely to continue to march in the vanguard of attempts to reform the Senate rules, especially those that arm the filibuster."[65]

The transition from Kerr to Anderson as chair of the Senate Space Committee, then, is also a reflection of the changing times of the Senate. Kerr sought to establish and maintain power in a more traditional senatorial manner, whereas Anderson, despite his being elected at the same time, represented a more activist wing of the Senate that sought to change longtime norms and rules. Given the four hypotheses, then, Kerr's death alone does little to explain Kerr's failures to secure NASA pork. Rather, his death reinforces the hypotheses of lack of industrial capacity in Oklahoma and changing times for the Senate.

A Scene in Congressional Development

This research started off by asking why Senator Robert Kerr of Oklahoma was not more successful in securing space pork for his constituents with a primary hypothesis that it had to do with his death. If indeed his death led to this result, then the case of Senator Kerr is instructive in terms of the importance of the individual in the Senate of the 1960s. The counterfactual scenario of what could have happened in Oklahoma if Kerr had lived would help to support the argument. However, it seems this individualist argument is the least important in the four hypotheses considered here. In fact, Kerr's death and the shift in leadership on the Senate Space Committee only serve to reinforce the importance of the institutional setting of the House

and Senate in constraining his influence over where NASA contracts eventually ended up.

In thinking about which of these hypotheses most directly contributed or contributed the most to Oklahoma's situation, it is hard not to think about congressional dynamics. Between the House's supremacy in appropriations and the changing power structure of the Senate, Robert Kerr was not a man of the times. His chair of the Space Committee is clearly overshadowed by Anderson's chair and Anderson's White Sands coup in the first year as chair. With Anderson's allegiance to the incoming liberals in the Senate, Anderson was better placed to take advantage of the shifting dynamics that even the NASA congressional liaison noticed and played to. Even though House appropriators got more attention from NASA, it did not mean that senators got none as the cases of Anderson and Stennis of Mississippi demonstrate. While Oklahoma's industrial capacity might also play a role, Oklahoma had and still has the thing that NASA valued in selecting the test areas in New Mexico and Mississippi: land. Senator Kerr's lack of success, then, is quite misplaced given the context of space policy in the 1960s and can be mostly attributed to the rapidly changing Congress.

While space policy and NASA have often been studied in terms of public opinion, policymaking, and appropriations among other topics, it has not previously been used to understand the beginning of the congressional reform period in the early 1960s. To that end, this analysis presents yet another avenue of approach to studying congressional change and demonstrates the policy implications that those changes hold. Many congressional scholars, in focusing on the major period of change in the 1970s, tend to relegate these early beginnings to brief analysis and explanation but this account demonstrates some of the earliest effects of the changing times in both the Senate and the House that scholars should not entirely ignore.

This article, then, not only represents an exploration and analysis of the case of Senator Robert Kerr and NASA but an attempt to place policymaking within a context of institutional development. It thus brings attention to the fact that even small legislative developments can have impacts of a magnitude not originally recognized. And in the case of understanding the policy history of NASA, this research once again highlights the importance of understanding political and institutional developments to explain the course of US space policy.

About the Author

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Notes

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