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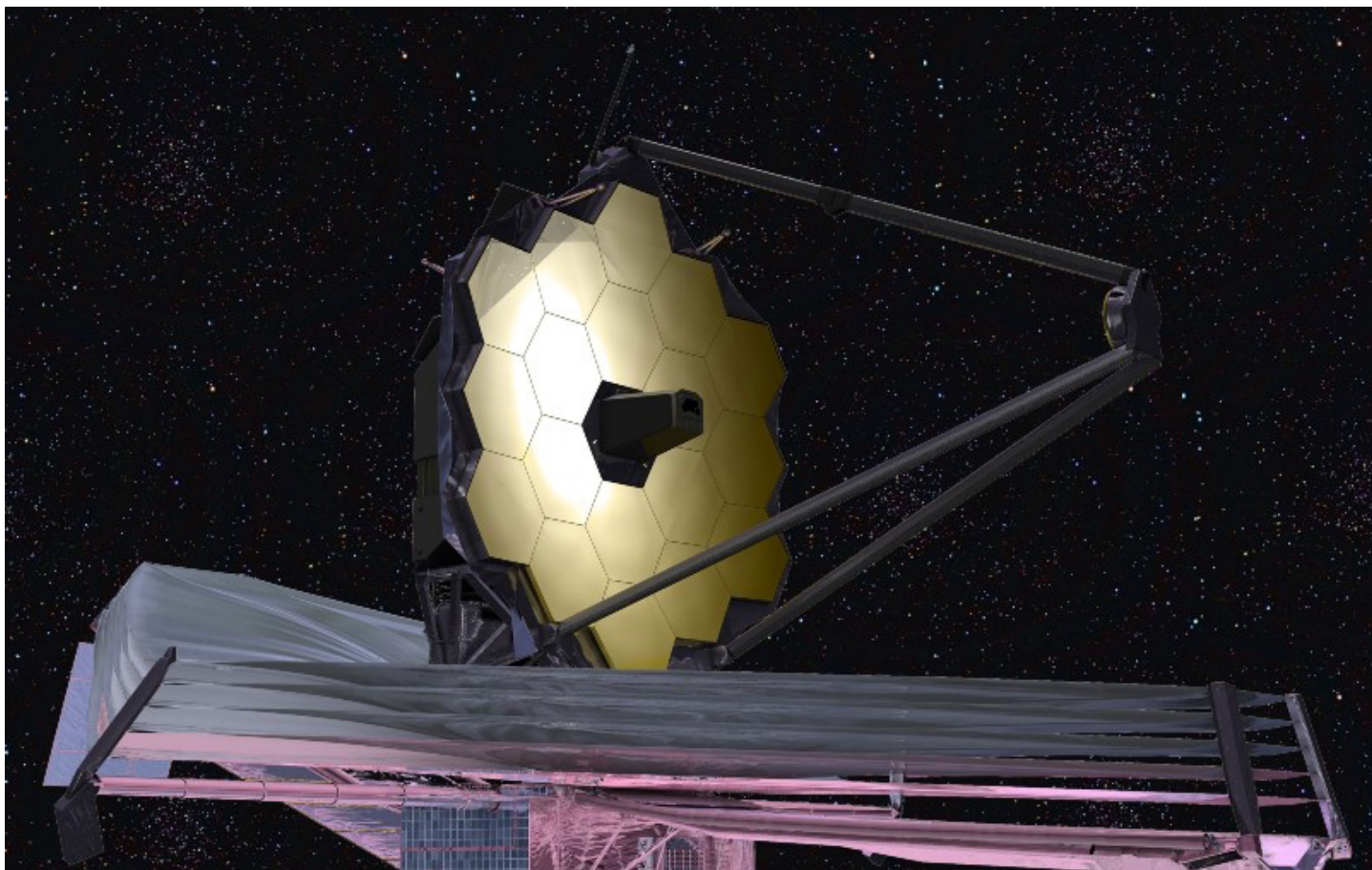
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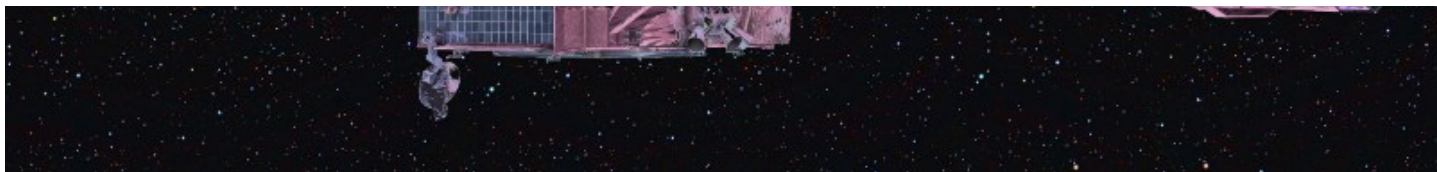
# Was NASA's Historic Leader James Webb a Bigot?

He's been vilified for years on the internet by some astronomers and physicists — but is it true?



Hakeem Oluseyi · 1 day ago · 16 min read





Artists model of James Webb Space Telescope with Sun shield deployed as it will look once in space. (NASA)

The James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) is NASA's next great flagship observatory. It's set to continue — and extend — the illustrious scientific tradition established by the Hubble Space Telescope, while peering deeper into the universe and observing what Hubble could not.

James Edwin Webb, the telescope's namesake, was the second person to ever lead NASA, at the helm from 1961 until 1968 during the storied Apollo era. Thanks to his forward vision and administrative skill, Webb is credited with establishing NASA's aerospace infrastructure and scientific focus that has made NASA the undisputed worldwide leader in space exploration and research for the half century since Apollo 8, the first mission to take humans beyond Earth orbit. In the heat of the space race, Webb emphasized that NASA maintain a balance between its mission of placing humans in space and on the Moon and its mission of scientific exploration realized mainly through uncrewed missions.

Now to the point.

I'm writing this article to address rumors that have circulated in the astronomy and astrophysics community for over a decade and finally burst into the public a few years ago: allegations that James Webb was instrumental in initiating and carrying out efforts to remove "homosexuals" from the federal government in the late 1940s and 1950s when he held a high position in the State Department.

In full disclosure, I never met James Webb, who died in 1992. I have no idea what was in his heart and mind. But what I can say conclusively is that there is zero evidence that Webb is guilty of the allegations against him.

Rather than exposing a bigot — as Webb was described in two popular articles reporting this story in 2015 — my research suggests that the purveyors of these

allegations wrongly accused an innocent man who was, among more well-known achievements, a hero of diversity and inclusion in American government. He worked with Lyndon Johnson and John F. Kennedy to use NASA facilities in America's southern states to promote racial integration and equal opportunity in employment.

As described [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#), NASA was widely recognized as the leading federal agency in racial integration prior to the passing of The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and The Voting Rights Act of 1965, and throughout the duration of Webb's tenure.

Admittedly, matters of discrimination can be more complex upon deep examination than they appear on the surface. Civil Rights hero Lyndon Johnson is a prime example of such complexity. But in the case of Webb purportedly persecuting gays while at State, it's a case of mistaken identity. Apparently, the actions of his Department of State colleagues, John E. Puerifoy and Carlisle H. Humelsine, have been misattributed to him.

I first became aware of the allegations against Webb in the summer of 2015 through an article on Forbes.com bearing the provocative title *[The Problem with Naming Observatories for Bigots](#)*. In its opening line, the author labels Webb as, “an actively homophobic man who helped ruin the careers of LGBT scientists and civil servants.” The article goes on to assert that Webb led “State Department witch hunts” and participated in “anti-gay” activities.

After reading the forbes.com article I performed an internet search and found an article published five months earlier in January 2015 at a Seattle-based website thestranger.com titled *[Should NASA Name a Telescope After a Dead Guy Who Persecuted Gay People in the 1950s?](#)*

Inspired by a question from a reader who had learned of the allegations from reading Webb's [Wikipedia page](#), this article alleged that Webb was the catalyst for, and eager implementer of, the Lavender Scare — an effort to remove “sex perverts” from federal service in the late 1940s and 1950s.

I went to the Wikipedia page and found a sentence dating back to its creation in 2004:

“Webb testified to a Senate committee that most of the people removed from the government for moral turpitude were homosexuals.”

In 2011 Webb’s Wikipedia page was modified to include an alleged quote from Webb: “It is generally believed that those who engage in overt acts of perversion lack the emotional stability of normal persons.”

Over the next few weeks, I continued to search online to find more about Webb’s reputed homophobia but was unable to discover any more sources addressing his alleged role in the Lavender Scare. So, I turned to the private Facebook group (since disbanded) of astronomers and astrophysicists assembled online to discuss issues of equity and inclusion in the profession.

A vigorous discussion of Webb’s supposed role in the Lavender Scare had already been underway for six months since the January 2015 article had been published. Based on the comments therein, the community appeared to have accepted that Webb was in fact guilty of the allegations. Since the group was private, its policy prohibits quoting or naming members, so I will not. However, I will say that group members called for confronting NASA and demanding an answer to why they would choose to name a premier high-profile observatory after such an individual. Within the long discussion, I could find only one scientist who questioned the allegations. To be precise, this person did not question them per se but rather cautioned the group that they should perform their own investigation, get the full story, and verify it in its details prior to confronting NASA. I have found no evidence of anyone having undertaken the task of investigating the story more deeply. But the articles repeating the allegations against Webb have continued.

In this 2019 article titled *The Lavender Scare*, which references the 2015 Forbes article as its source, the author states:

*In 1950, the U.S. State Department fired 91 employees because they were homosexual or suspected of being homosexual. In the next two years, nearly 200 more state employees were dismissed for the same reason. The man who oversaw the purge was Undersecretary of State James E. Webb. Later, as administrator of NASA, Webb enlisted the assistance of*

*the Nazi war criminal Wernher von Braun to help put Americans on the moon.*

From this point forward, I describe my research into the topic to understand exactly how The Lavender Scare was initiated and implemented within the U.S. Department of State, and exactly what role James Webb played, if any.

To begin, I looked up the primary reference for the James E Webb Wikipedia article, which at first glance appears to be the origination point for the story. I acquired the book *Toward Stonewall: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World* by retired University of Virginia Professor Nicholas Edsall, which is the reference for the Wikipedia entry on Webb's alleged role in initiating the Lavender Scare. On pages 276–277 I found the following:

*The politics of anti-Communism dated back to the beginnings of the Cold War in 1947–48 and were first broadened to include homosexuals in 1950, when an undersecretary of state testified to a Senate committee that most of the government employees dismissed for moral turpitude were in fact homosexual. Sensing that they had uncovered a potentially disastrous weakness in the Truman administration, Republicans took up the issue with enthusiasm, and Democrats, suddenly placed on the defensive, felt compelled to follow suit. The Senate appointed a committee to investigate the employment of homosexuals in the federal government. Though cautious in estimating the number of “sex perverts” in government service, the committee report, issued in December 1950, nonetheless painted an alarming picture of their character, their influence, and their potential threat to the nation’s security.*

This passage does not name Webb explicitly as the person who testified before the Senate. It only states that “an undersecretary of state” testified. Through a quick internet search I was able to find several authoritative sources that corroborated that Webb was indeed the Under Secretary of State in 1950. Unfortunately, no reference was provided for Webb's alleged Senate testimony.

The book continued:

*“It is generally believed,” the report noted, “that those who engage in overt acts of*

*perversion lack the emotional stability of normal persons. In addition there is an abundance of evidence to sustain the conclusion that indulgence in acts of sexual perversion weakens the moral fiber of an individual to a degree that he is not suitable for a position of responsibility.” What is more, the committee “investigation has shown that the presence of a sex pervert in a Government agency tends to have a corrosive influence upon his fellow employees. These perverts will frequently attempt to entice normal individuals to engage in perverted practices. This is particularly true in the case of young and impressionable people who might command the influence of a pervert.... One homosexual can pollute a Government office.”*

The first sentence of this passage contains the quote attributed to Webb and added to his Wikipedia article in 2011 and repeated in the article on thestranger.com. The passage does not place the words in Webb’s mouth directly, however, but attributes them to a report issued by the Senate appointed committee. To determine which is correct, I performed an internet search for the quote keeping in mind that the quote could be from a Senate appointed committee *and* Webb, provided he was a member of said committee.

I quickly found the quote’s source. It appears in a Senate Committee report titled *Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government* submitted to the *Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments by its Subcommittee on Investigations* (i.e., the Hoey subcommittee) and dated December 15, 1950. The report’s second page lists the members of the Committee on Expenditures and also of the Subcommittee on Investigations. The first committee consisted of 13 senators including Joseph McCarthy plus a clerk, and the second consisted of seven senators plus a legal counsel. James Webb was not a member of either committee. Clearly, the quote was misattributed to him. Nonetheless, it had remained on his Wikipedia page and claimed to be his words, for just over four years from May 7, 2011 until July 1, 2015.

I next sought to obtain a copy of Webb’s alleged 1950 Senate testimony. After an unsuccessful search of online congressional databases, I contacted NASA historians and archivists at two Centers and NASA Headquarters to enlist their assistance. None of

them had ever heard of the allegations against Webb. This was not completely unexpected as Webb did not start at NASA until 1961 and was out of government service completely from 1953 until he began his tenure as NASA's leader in 1961.

On the other hand, they had plenty to offer on Webb's actions regarding the hiring of African Americans at NASA facilities in the early 1960s. Not only did Webb, at the instruction of President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson, make sure that NASA Centers in the Deep South were racially integrated, based on letters I've read between Webb and others, he appeared to have been personally motivated to take on the Southern politicians to achieve this goal.

At this point in my research, I wondered if Webb was just a "good soldier" who when ordered to persecute gays while in the State Department did so, and when ordered to integrate NASA facilities in the South he did that, too. But as a scholar, I could not simply wonder. Academic rigor required that I obtain Webb's Senate testimony and also figure out exactly what his activities had been while at the State Department.

I found that the Truman Library in Independence, Missouri contained the *James E. Webb Papers* covering the period from 1928–1980. I performed an online search of the library's holdings on Webb and found several boxes that contained detailed files on his State Department service. As I searched through the contents of the boxes one by one, I was again unsuccessful in finding the particular testimony referenced in *Toward Stonewall* and his Wikipedia page.

As you can imagine, it is literally impossible to find official documents for an event that never happened.

Webb never testified before a Senate committee in 1950 about gay people removed from federal service for "moral turpitude" as his Wikipedia article has said from the day it was written in 2004. As far as I can tell, James Webb never played a role in the Lavender Scare at all. It was a case of mistaken identity.

The "undersecretary of state" referred to in *Toward Stonewall* was in fact John Peurifoy, not Webb. Confusingly, both held jobs at the Department of State that included the

phrase “Under Secretary,” though their job functions were entirely different.

Webb held the job title that was simply, Under Secretary of State. According to the Department of State’s Office of the Historian, the Under Secretary position was second in command at the Department from the position’s creation on March 1, 1919 until July 1972.

The Under Secretary functioned as the principal deputy and chief assistant to the Secretary of State, served as Acting Secretary of State in the Secretary’s absence, and provided guidance and direction to the activities of the Department.

For three years from January 28, 1949 until February 29, 1952 Webb reported directly to Secretary of State Dean Acheson. Webb’s main work involved first reorganizing the Department of State during the first half of 1949 and then working with Acheson to define America’s foreign policy during the Cold War. For example, on June 25, 1950 the North Korean Army invaded South Korea and Acheson and Webb devised a strategy for the U.S., which they advised to President Truman, encouraging him to intervene.

By contrast, the positions held by Peurifoy and Humelsine supervised the internal running of the State Department including matters of security, personnel and human resources.

Peurifoy was the Assistant Secretary of State for Administration from March 15, 1947 until August 10, 1950. He also held two additional titles that are likely what led to the confusion with Webb. Starting May 26, 1949 he was designated as the Deputy Under Secretary for Administration as well as the Deputy Under Secretary of State for Management. He held all three titles at the time he testified to the Senate in February 1950, sparking the Lavender Scare.

Humelsine was the Director of the Executive Secretariat, Office of the Secretary of State from 1947 to 1950 . He then succeeded Peurifoy as the Assistant Secretary of State for Administration beginning July 29, 1950 until February 13, 1953. Humelsine also served as the Deputy Under Secretary of State for Management from August 11, 1950 until February 13, 1953.



What I describe next comes primarily from three sources: a 1950 memo from Humelsine to Webb, the State Department's freely accessible web-based document titled *History of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security of the United States Department of State*, and the book *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* by Robert D. Dean, which is freely accessible in part through Google Books. It is notable that within the detailed accounting of the Lavender Scare as described in these sources, Peurifoy and Humelsine are mentioned as actors throughout, but Webb is not.

As I shall illustrate in the following paragraphs, while Peurifoy and Humelsine were the foot soldiers who carried out The Lavender Scare within the State Department, the chain of events leading up to it began in 1943 with the actions of Republican Senator from Nebraska, Kenneth Wherry. Starting on page 76 of *Imperial Brotherhood* we find:

*Kenneth Wherry considered himself the Senate expert on "homosexuality." He boasted of his attempts to eliminate "from the Department of State procommunists, subversives, and other alien-minded radicals of low standards of morality," efforts dating from his 1943 election to the senate. Wherry, joined by Senator Lester Hill, a Democrat from Alabama, conducted his own investigation into homosexual "infiltration of the government."*

Continuing on page 79 we find the connection with Peurifoy:

*Undersecretary John Peurifoy testified to senators Wherry and Hill that the State Department maintained its own blacklist, accumulated since January 1947, "of about 3,000 names of persons in this country and abroad who are homosexuals or alleged homosexuals." Wherry tried to get the list to check names against Blick's roster, but Peurifoy denied the request, invoking Truman's executive order closing personnel files to the congressional branch. Peurifoy, however, assured the counterperversion crusader that "applicants for positions in the State Department as well as the 23,000 employees of the Department in this country and abroad are checked against this list."*

Wherry's demands for an investigation of homosexuals in government spurred the formation of the Hoey subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Expenditures to investigate the "alleged employment by the departments and agencies of government of homosexuals and other moral perverts."

According to the Department of State's *The History of the Bureau* document, the work of "removing homosexuals" from the Department was performed by the *Division of Security (SY)*. On page 124, Figure 3 is an image of a chart titled *Chain of Command for Personnel Security*. It states that the Secretary of State: *Delegated full authority on Security matters to Humelsine February 18, 1947.*

On page 127, Figure 6 is titled *Enforcing the President's Loyalty Program* and presents a flow chart that describes "the stages of security and loyalty reviews." It shows that if questions were raised by an "FBI Record Check" of an individual, there was a "FBI Full Field Investigation" followed by a *State Department Loyalty and Security Board* recommendation to Carlisle Humelsine for action, resulting in the employee's separation or clearance.

By the time Webb joined the Department in January 1949, Peurifoy and Humelsine, had already been working to remove gays from federal service for two years.

The only evidence I could find that links Webb to the Lavender Scare is a memo Humelsine sent to Webb dated June 23, 1950, two days before the North Korean invasion of South Korea. The document titled *Problem of Homosexuals and Sex Perverts in the Department of State* appears to serve the purpose of bringing Webb up to date on the perceived security risk posed by "homosexuals" and the ongoing efforts to remove them from federal service; in essence, illustrating that Webb was ignorant of the effort though he'd been at State for about a year and a half.

Humelsine's memo also illustrates that not only did Peurifoy trigger the Lavender Scare with his February 1950 Senate testimony, he was primarily responsible for implementing the effort to remove gays from State beginning in 1947. Humelsine's memo states:

*It was not until January 1947 when Mr. Peurifoy became Assistant Secretary for Administration that the problem of homosexuality in the Department of State was dealt with in a direct and forthright manner.*

So what did Webb do at the Department of State?

Webb began his tenure as the number two leader at the Department of State during one of America's most dangerous eras. In 1948 a Soviet Union sponsored coup overthrew the democratically elected government of Czechoslovakia turning it communist. That same year the Soviet Union blockaded all ground access to Berlin resulting in the Western Allies undertaking the Berlin Airlift to supply West Berlin citizens with food, fuel, and other necessities. The spread of communism across central and eastern Europe led to the formation of NATO in April 1949, three months into Webb's tenure.

At the time Webb started at State in January 1949 America was the world's lone nuclear power. That changed in August 1949 when Soviet Russia exploded its first nuclear warhead. Two months later in October 1949, China too became a communist nation with Mao's proclamation of the People's Republic of China. Then in 1950, communist North Korea invaded South Korea. Once the U.S. intervened and China backed North Korea, World War III and the use of nuclear weapons was a serious world concern.

Given the urgency of Webb's roles working with Acheson to develop America's diplomatic and intelligence strategies during this time of international upheaval and crises in the heat of the Cold War, it seems unlikely he would have been concerned with the Department of States' internal personnel matters that already had firm ownership within SY.

However, I do take caution. It is well known that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Nonetheless, on the specific allegations against Webb the evidence is clear. He was not the initiator of the Lavender Scare and he was not in charge of investigating allegations of "homosexuality" or deciding the fate of accused individuals. The evidence shows conclusively that those actions are to be credited to Wherry and Hill in the Senate, and Puerifoy and Humelsine in the Department of State.

Ultimately, in 1953, after both Webb and Peurifoy had left State, a new structure was created within SY with the specific purpose of investigating allegations of "homosexuality" among the State Department employees. According to the *History of the Bureau*:

*SY created the “M” (Miscellaneous) Unit to investigate charges of homosexuality. The M Unit consulted police and vice squad records, and briefed chiefs of mission on how to recognize homosexuality. Staffed by two full-time agents and several part-time staff, the M Unit primarily used personal interviews and an occasional polygraph test (legal at the Department since 1950).*

According to Peurifoy’s Senate testimony and statistics from SY there were indeed many careers ruined: 91 people were fired from January 1, 1947 through February 28, 1950; 54 were fired in 1950; 119 in 1951; 134 in 1952; 99 in 1953; and 27 in the first three months of 1954.

According to director Josh Howard’s documentary *The Lavender Scare*, based on a [book](#) of the same name by David Johnson, several of the people outed and removed from federal service committed suicide and ultimately, more than 10,000 people were removed from their jobs across the federal government. The Lavender Scare was an injustice of immense proportion.

Wrongly convicting one innocent person is also an immense injustice. The layers of failure that led to this misattribution of appalling behavior to James Webb, which has persisted for a decade and a half, are themselves appalling. This entire episode represents an example of shoddy investigative rigor from both scientific scholars and journalists. They all should have known better and they all should have done better.

Toward Stonewall did not properly cite the sources for the Senate testimony that ignited the Lavender Scare and was loose with language, thus facilitating the Wikipedia misattribution to Webb — in conflict with the Wikipedia pages on Peurifoy and The Lavender Scare, which both explicitly name Peurifoy’s 1950 testimony as the prime initiation event.

The two authors who wrote the articles on forbes.com and thestranger.com did not apply proper journalistic rigor. They accepted the rumors without corroboration from authoritative sources — and worse, piled on.

The author of the forbes.com article references a professional astrophysicist as his

original source for learning of the allegations against Webb. This scientist propagated unsubstantiated false information as if it were true without performing proper scientific rigor to investigate its veracity.

The community of astronomers and astrophysicists in the online social media group who blindly accepted the allegations also piled on and were ready to confront NASA although they did not apply proper rigor.

Personally, I find Webb's life story quite compelling. From his work at the Department of State helping to define America's Cold War strategies — including recruiting a physicist to assist with assembling a team of scientists to begin implementing a plan of psychological warfare — to his efforts to implement equal opportunity hiring at NASA facilities in America's south, to his establishment of NASA infrastructure and strategy in the 1960s.

Webb also encountered many obstacles ranging from political rivalries within State that led to his departure due to health concerns, the 1967 loss of the Apollo 1 crew to fire, and ultimately his resignation from NASA for political reasons. Given the many ups and downs, Webb's career is a great American story of political intrigue, triumph and disaster, fit for the big screen that I hope the public may come to appreciate.

But most of all, I hope that members of astronomy's LGBTQI+ community will now be freed of any burdens that may have borne from encountering the misinformation on Webb.

As a Black scientist from the Deep South who's had to navigate the shoals of a scientific establishment where I've not always felt welcome, I imagine how I would feel if I faced the equivalent — a flagship national observatory named after someone who was accused of being a staunch racist and national enforcer of racial segregation. Thankfully, Webb was not the bigoted homophobe who led State Department witch hunts as rumored.

Naming a flagship space observatory after Webb is a fitting recognition of his contributions to NASA science, even if he was just an administrator. I eagerly look

forward to the wonders of the universe that the James Webb Space Telescope — and the application of rigorous scientific scrutiny — are expected to reveal.

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