

THE U.S.

Racism Charges Swirl Around Ouster of Boston School Chief

By Lawrence J. Goodrich
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

BOSTON

WHEN Laval Wilson came to Boston five years ago from Rochester, N.Y., to be superintendent of schools, he was widely hailed.

He had a reputation as a tough administrator who could root out cronyism and incompetence and reverse a high dropout rate. As Boston's first black superintendent, Mr. Wilson became an important symbol of the city's efforts to recover from the racial conflict stirred by busing in the 1970s.

But last week, the school committee effectively fired Wilson during a heated session in which all four black members and one white member stormed out, one terming it a "private lynching."

The committee's decision to buy out the remainder of the superintendent's contract, which expires in June 1991, ended more than a year of political wrangling. Six of the committee's 13 members voted to dismiss him last June. Instead, Wilson and the board agreed to review his performance every six months using a set of criteria such as test-score performance, dropout rates, balancing the budget, and negotiating a new teachers' contract.

But the political balance on the committee changed last November, when two new members were elected on an anti-Wilson platform. Wilson and his supporters on the board contend that the committee violated its own process by arbitrarily deciding to pay off Wilson's contract without reviewing his evaluation or giving any reason for the dismissal.

Several black leaders, still upset over alleged racism by Boston police in the Carol Stuart murder case, believe that Wilson was fired because of his race.

"I don't think it is the case. I know it is," charges Louis Elisa, president of Boston's chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

"Some people had difficulty taking directions from a black superintendent," Wilson himself told a press conference last week.

"His evaluations were good," says John O'Bryant, a school committee member who supports Wilson. The committee "never followed a procedure where they outlined the problems and allowed him to respond."

But other blacks are less than enthusiastic about Wilson. Boston Globe columnist Derrick Jackson wrote that the superintendent began showing up at black events only last year, when his support on the school committee was waning. "Wilson was not a superintendent of the people," he wrote.

School committee member Peggy Mullen-Davis, an outspoken Wilson opponent, denies the racism charges. "Personality and racism had nothing to do with it," she says. "Laval is an extraordinarily hard worker. But he is on his own track." She says Wilson ignored or would not implement committee policies to cut the dropout rate, do more for at-risk youth, and tackle school violence.

Wilson's critics also blame an aloof management style, unwillingness to delegate responsibility, and inability to build bridges to parents and teachers. His pursuit

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of jobs in New York City and Oakland, Calif., left the impression his heart was not in Boston.

The crux of the matter was a "fundamental mismatch" between Wilson's centralized hands-on style and the school committee's shift to school-based management, says David Crandall, president of The Network Inc., an Andover, Mass., firm that assists school systems in performance evaluation and teacher training.

"At the outset, [the school committee] thought they needed a hard-line administrator," Mr. Crandall says. But when shifting to school-based management, he says, "the last thing you want is an administrator who has an I-have-all-the-answers orientation."

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Crandall compares the Boston schools to those of New York City. "Neither system is organized for the benefit of the kids. Anything they get is in spite of the system, and due to the extraordinary energy of the teachers and building-based people. The system is a monster that serves itself. It has lost sight of what it's supposed to do — focus on students and their learning."

SCIENCE CONFERENCE

Scientists Show Eastern US Why It Should Heed Quake Warnings

By Robert C. Coward
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

NEW ORLEANS

EARTHQUAKE scientists continue to warn North Americans living east of the Rocky Mountains not to take earthquake safety for granted.

Arch Johnston of Memphis State University says large parts of the eastern United States are at risk. Yet communities there have barely started to adopt seismically sound building codes. Public awareness of the hazard and emergency response preparations also are seriously lagging.

Dr. Johnston repeated that familiar — if not yet heeded — warning at a symposium where experts reviewed some of the latest eastern earthquake research. Held during the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the session reflected seismologists' growing understanding of this quake threat.

The most threatened region, according to present knowledge, is centered on the New Madrid Seismic Zone. This includes large areas of Arkansas, Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, and Tennessee, plus a bit of Indiana. It was the center of a major seismic event in 1811 and 1812 involving three quakes.

University of Nevada geologist Steven Wesnousky says the New Madrid earthquake was, in terms of area, the largest United States quake known either historically or from the geological record. It involved large ground movements over several thousands of square miles.

Johnston, working with geological evidence, estimates the largest New Madrid quake magnitude was about 8.1 to 8.3 on the Richter scale. There have been larger magnitude quakes in

North America along the western zone. But their main effects were felt over smaller areas.

Western quakes generally occur where two plates in Earth's crust rub together or where one plate underrides another. Quake-generating faults are usually related to the plate boundaries. Where a fault slips to cause a quake, the bedrock typically has little overlying sediment.

The New Madrid zone is, by contrast, in the middle of a plate. Quake-generating faults (cracks in the plate) lie under a mile or more of loose river-deposited sediment. This liquefies readily during a quake, thereby greatly extending the area of the quake's influence.

Dr. Wesnousky and his research colleagues are studying the extent of that influence as it is reflected in the geological traces left by the 1811-12 events, as well as by lesser quakes. He and other researchers find ample evidence of seismic activity over a wide area. But there is no sign of any other quake in the magnitude 8 range in geological evidence extending back 10,000 years.

Johnston explained that this now leaves an uncomfortable uncertainty. Geological evidence and seismic monitoring data gathered since 1974 show relatively small quakes recur regularly. Magnitude 6 quakes — the strongest for which such statistics are available — have an average frequency of 70 to 90 years. But there is nothing to indicate whether a really big shock, such as the New Madrid event, is likely to recur.

Under these circumstances, the geologists here say, their best advice is that communities in the eastern United States should be prepared for moderate to very severe quakes with the understanding that there is no way yet to foresee how likely a really big shock may be. This ignorance also means that, while the New Madrid zone appears to have the greatest risk, no region east of the Rockies can be considered risk-free.

More Researchers Use Computer Hot Rods

By Simson Garfinkel
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

NEW ORLEANS

NO longer a luxury for the privileged few, supercomputers are becoming standard tools for solving scientific problems, a panel of scientists says.

The machines, so named because they can perform calculations up to a thousand times faster than conventional desktop computers, are playing a growing role in air pollution research, agriculture, biochemistry, and medicine, according to researchers at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

A group at the Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, for example, is using a supercomputer simulation to chip away at Los Angeles air pollution. The simulation, which runs on a Cray Y-MP/832, allows scientists to monitor the flow of nearly 50 kinds of chemicals over the city and explore the impact of temperature, sunlight, and weather on smog and ground-level ozone.

With the supercomputer, scientists can perform experiments that would be impossible to

conduct in a lab or in the city, says Gregory McRae, a scientist who worked on the Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) project.

"You can take away half the cars in Los Angeles inside the computer," and the computer can calculate what the change would be on the city's pollution, Dr. McRae explains. Two hundred hours of supercomputer time are needed to simulate a single day of smog. "To simulate processes of this scale would have taken several years on conventional computers," he says.

Supercomputers have become an important tool, in part, as a result of a 1985 National Science Foundation program that established five supercomputer centers across the nation. Nevertheless, "there is a very serious problem in the US with the lack of this kind of computer power," McRae says.

In the case of Los Angeles, the CMU group discovered that the government's approach to controlling ozone was flawed because the plan concentrated only on reducing airborne hydrocarbons, ignoring nitrogen oxides. As a result, laws have been changed. "Research with supercomputers can save us hundreds of millions of dollars," by telling policymakers the most crucial pollutants to regulate, McRae says.