

Gibbons Veers from Nonpartisan Past to Attack Republican Cuts in Science

The spectacle of President Clinton's science adviser as a partisan politician startled and alarmed many who had gathered in the hotel ballroom for the annual R&D budget forum of the American Association for the Advancement of Science on 18 April. By deliberately attacking and sometimes ridiculing the new Republican majority in Congress, John H. Gibbons appeared to be creating a political gulf in science policy, an area that has rarely known such rifts and has in fact enjoyed mostly bipartisan support for the past 50 years.

The message that Gibbons delivered at the AAAS meeting was hardly new to the audience of some 500 science policy specialists—that bad times are coming for R&D programs funded by the Federal government. In fact, Gibbons admitted at one point that he didn't intend to raise expectations “that we in the Administration will be able to completely insulate science and technology from the real fiscal pressures that will drive the next decade of budget policy. The reality is grim for science and technology funding. There will be cuts; R&D will have to take some of them.”

Campaign sloganeering

Even so, said Gibbons, “the Administration has held fast to the principle of wise investment in science and technology—not because it's a good thing politically, not because there's PAC [political action committee] money here, not because there's a great and clamoring constituency—but because it's important and the President and Vice President believe in it.” More campaign sloganeering followed. The R&D budget that the Clinton Administration sent to Capitol Hill on 6 February, said Gibbons, “represents the actions of deliberate and dedicated government, husbanding and making careful, multiple use of resources for the future of our children and our grandchildren. It reflects the vision of the Clinton Administration—science and technology in the service of society, an engine of growth for the economy and the creator of knowledge that is the key to a new world condition.”

By contrast, Gibbons charged, “the specter of finishing the first session of the 104th Congress with science and technology slashed by a meat ax is a

real one. . . . The bad news for R&D reads like a litany of the lost.” After listing the recisions that Congress has made in the current year's allocations for the technology programs at the Commerce Department, university programs at the Defense Department and materials research, climate change and human genome programs at the Energy Department, Gibbons attacked the other reductions that Congress is “thinking about doing.”

Gibbons expressed “fear” that “extremists in Congress” with a “fundamental disregard for reinvestment in science and technology” will prevail in their efforts to reshape the Administration's budget for fiscal 1996 and target additional “whopping” reductions for the following four years. In their rush to cut budgets, he added, “it sometimes seems that some members in the new Congress don't want to be confused by the facts.”

Gibbons called on those in the science community likely to be affected to raise their voices about threats to their own self-interest. While Gibbons's contentious language might be expected from a politician, some scientists said later that Gibbons should not have abused his bully pulpit to engage in political sniping.

The irony is that for months Gibbons has been under attack for being the “invisible” science adviser to Clinton. The personal choice of Vice President Al Gore for the job, Gibbons was among the first White House appointees to be named by Clinton, weeks before the 1993 inauguration. An urbane and genial Virginia farmer who had been a physicist at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Gibbons spent almost 14 years as director of Congress's Office of Technology Assessment. In that position he was scrupulously bipartisan and earned the respect of leading lawmakers in both parties. Many members of Congress, including Gore when he was a senator from Tennessee, admired Gibbons as a consensus builder and conciliator. But the keynote address that Gibbons gave at the AAAS forum may have changed that view.

In his talk Gibbons also argued against the proposal by House Republicans to create a new Cabinet-level Department of Science, which would

include the National Science Foundation, NASA, the Environmental Protection Agency and the research programs at the Departments of Commerce and of Energy. At this point, however, the idea of a new department does not include the Energy Department's nuclear defense programs, the Defense Department's research operations or the National Institutes of Health, which taken together account for about two-thirds of all Federal support for academic R&D.

“The Administration unequivocally opposes the creation of a Department of Science of the kind now being discussed in Congress,” declares Gibbons. Such a department, he added, would impose “a command-and-control model of rigid bureaucracy” on civilian research, even in universities.

A Department of Science is not a novel concept. It was first proposed in 1884 by a Senate commission headed by William B. Allison, an Ohio Republican. In the last Congress, Representative Robert S. Walker, a Republican of Pennsylvania, introduced a bill to create a Department of Science on behalf of himself and George S. Brown Jr, the California Democrat who headed the science committee before the Republican takeover of Congress this year.

Coordinating expenditures

Walker champions a Science Department as a way of cutting and coordinating government expenditures on research. He claims a department would raise the status of science in the White House because it would be represented at the White House Cabinet table. At a briefing for the news media in April, Walker suggested that putting science programs under one department “might force” Congress to do a better job of coordinating legislation for them. “We are structured in ways that are just mind-boggling,” says Walker, alluding to the 22 Congressional committees now responsible for various science programs.

Scientists are skeptical about the idea because, they argue, it would reduce the number of agencies to which they are now able to pitch their research proposals.

For his part, Brown no longer supports the concept of a Science Department. He believes the “driving force”

behind Walker's proposed new legislation for such a department is really based on the intention to dismantle the Energy and Commerce Departments—an outcome Walker admits would make the creation of a Science Department essential.

Of more immediate importance, Brown contends, is the House Budget Committee's plan for supporting non-defense R&D. According to the plan released on 10 May, Federal funds for R&D in agencies under the jurisdiction of the House Science Committee would plunge from \$27.2 billion in the current year to \$20.6 billion in fiscal

2000. That draconian plan was devised by Budget Committee Chairman John R. Kasich, an Ohio Republican, and Walker, who is the committee's vice chairman at the same time as he heads the Science Committee. Brown argues that the Kasich-Walker budget concept "represents a retreat from the Federal government's historical role as a driver of R&D." Brown's assault on the Republican spending proposal is much less feisty than the battle plan drawn up by Gibbons—and is probably more effective.

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Pseudo-History Redux: FBI Clears Atomic Bomb Physicists of Spying

The FBI has closed the book on sensational allegations that Niels Bohr, Robert Oppenheimer, Enrico Fermi and Leo Szilard had knowingly passed classified information about US nuclear bombs to Soviet agents during World War II. The charges against the four giants of 20th-century physics were made by a former NKGD officer, Pavel Sudoplatov, in his autobiography, *Special Tasks: The Memoirs of an Unwanted Witness—a Soviet Spymaster* (Little, Brown, 1994). Among the most contentious allegations was that Bohr had revealed important technical data during a discussion with a Soviet agent, Iakov Terletsii, at the Bohr Institute in Copenhagen in 1945. Sudoplatov's claims outraged many US physicists, who denounced the accusations as inaccurate and irresponsible (see PHYSICS TODAY, June 1994, page 59).

After an internal review of still-classified US counterespionage files and now-declassified Soviet documents, FBI Director Louis J. Freeh, a former Federal judge and prosecutor, issued a one-page statement that said the bureau "is not in possession of any credible evidence" that Bohr, Fermi, Oppenheimer or Szilard "engaged in any espionage activity on behalf of any foreign power to include that involving atomic bomb secrets. Indeed, the FBI has classified information available that argues against the conclusions reached by the author of *Special Tasks*. The FBI, therefore, considers such allegations to be unfounded."

The FBI was asked in early March to investigate Sudoplatov's charges by Les Aspin, a former Defense Secretary and Congressman from Wisconsin, and Sidney Drell, deputy director of SLAC. Both serve on the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, which Aspin chairs. With the

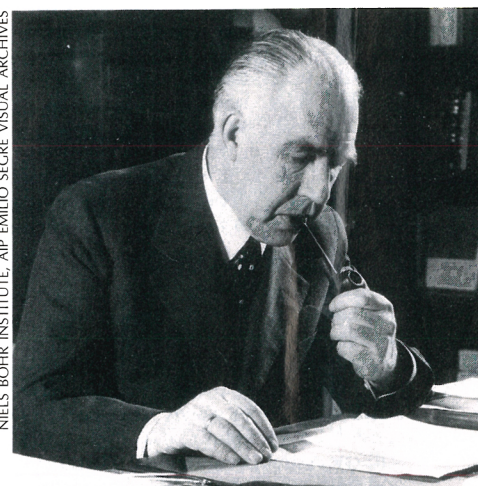
collapse of the Soviet Union, the FBI opened an office in Moscow and has been delving into NKVD, NKGB and KGB memos, reports and transcripts, many of which have now been made available to historians and other researchers. At a press briefing on 1 May in Washington at which the FBI statement was released, Aspin said the agency's evidence includes lists of people, some with code names, who assisted the Soviet Union's nuclear weapons program. The names of the four physicists did not appear on any of the Soviet lists, Aspin stated.

"This is like a Sherlock Holmes case of the dog that didn't bark," Aspin added. "Their names are not on the lists. This is not proof. It's nearly impossible to prove a negative. . . . The FBI is now very comfortable in its belief that Sudoplatov is mistaken." Aspin then suggested that Sudoplatov may have confused some code names and identities or his memory may have become muddled some 50 years after the alleged events. Sudoplatov was 86 years old when he was interviewed by Jerrold and Leona Schecter, who assisted him in writing *Special Tasks*. Present at the news briefing, the Schecters defended Sudoplatov and said the charges should not be discounted until historians whose bonafides are unshakable are allowed to see certain files held by the US, Britain and Russia. The Federation of American Scientists had called for an extensive review of this sort when Sudoplatov's memoirs were published.

Since none of the four physicists are living and can defend their reputations, one of their contemporaries, Hans Bethe, who led the theoretical physics division at Los Alamos when the bombs were designed and built, spoke for them. "I was always con-

vinced that the charges were unfounded," he said, "but I am delighted and grateful that the FBI has issued its report."

Russian physicists also have challenged the accuracy and authenticity of Sudoplatov's claims. In an open letter organized last year by Vitalii Goldanskii of the Semenov Institute of Chemical Physics in Moscow and signed by nine other prominent members of the Russian Academy of Sciences, they cite Sudoplatov's memoirs as an effort "not only to discredit our intelligentsia but also to create political tensions internally and internationally, to produce an atmosphere of xenophobia and to generate hostility and mistrust within the world scientific community." They went on to reject the accusations against Bohr, Fermi, Oppenheimer and Szilard as "absolutely unsubstantiated, malicious and provocative" and to declare that the first Soviet bomb tested in 1949 was achieved with the help of information passed by Klaus Fuchs to Soviet agents and then delivered to Igor Kurchatov, who led the Soviet project. What's more, they support



NIELS BOHR in Copenhagen in 1945.

the 1992 account by Iulii Khariton, former director of Arzamas-16, on the decision to test a copy of the US bomb that was exploded at Alamo-gordo and Nagasaki: Their letter says, "under the conditions that existed during the totalitarian regime of Stalin, a failure of the first Soviet atomic bomb would certainly have led to harsh punishment for all of Kurchatov's team and to the total devastation of Soviet physics (as happened shortly before, in 1948, to Soviet biology). The atomic test in August 1949 in fact saved Soviet physics."

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