

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

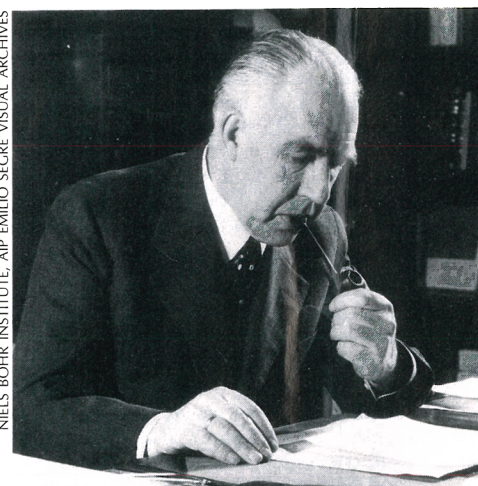
collapse of the Soviet Union, the FBI opened an office in Moscow and has been delving into NKVD, NKGB and KGB memos, reports and transcripts, many of which have now been made available to historians and other researchers. At a press briefing on 1 May in Washington at which the FBI statement was released, 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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