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As Republicans Try to Pull DOE's Plug, Department Officials Defend Operations

From just about the day President Carter established the Energy Department in 1977 it has been under seige. Critics argued that the department was assembled hastily to enable the Administration to show its determination to deal with the volatile crude oil market dominated by several hostile Middle East countries. DOE emerged from a literal grab-bag of agencies and programs, including the Atomic Energy Commission, which produced and safeguarded the nation's nuclear weapons arsenal, ran more than 20 national labs and sponsored basic research in high-energy and nuclear physics among many scientific fields; the Department of Interior's coal, natural gas and energy R&D operations; the Federal Energy Administration's operations in petroleum allocations and pricing regulations; the National Science Foundation's solar and geothermal energy programs; the Environmental Protection Agency's automobile research; and some other odds and ends such as the Strategic Petroleum Reserve and the Power Marketing Administrations.

Then in 1980 Ronald Reagan pledged during his Presidential campaign to abolish the department. Once in office Reagan had the backing of many of his political appointees on the seventh floor of DOE's sprawling Forrestal Building, across Independence Avenue from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. But Reagan met fierce resistance from both Democrats and Republicans in Congress. They even passed legislation preventing the Administration from studying whether to sell off parts of the department.

Now DOE is in graver peril. This time it's Congress that wants to pull the plug on Energy. Last December, only days before they were sworn into the 104th Congress, a group of newly elected House Republicans privately agreed on a strategy to demonstrate their conservative derring-do: They vowed to eliminate four Cabinet departments—Commerce, Education, Energy and Housing and Urban Development. On 14 February the freshmen, calling themselves the New Federalists, went public with their bold proposal—though at the time it was little



O'LEARY: Objections to 'trophies.'

more than a bare-bones outline, holding back many of the more controversial ideas, such as the recommendation to put the Defense Department in charge of DOE's military and commercial nuclear waste disposal program. The rookie members boasted that they had more than enough support in the House to eliminate DOE. "It's time to turn out the lights at the

Department of Energy," said Representative Todd Tiahrt of Kansas, a former proposal manager at Boeing.

On 23 May three former Energy Secretaries who served in the Reagan and Bush Administrations appeared before the House subcommittee on government management, information and technology to testify on the proposed dismantling of DOE. First up was Donald Paul Hodel, Secretary from 1982 to 1985, later Secretary of the Interior and now president of Summit Group International. Hodel, who had advised the New Federalists on their proposal to eliminate DOE, argued that "the very existence of a Department of Energy . . . sends the wrong signal to foreign countries and misleads the American public into believing the government can or is willing to do something about energy. There is no issue or combination of issues that justifies a DOE." The department, he said, "has little beneficial impact on energy in the US. It is a department without an energy mission. The closest it comes is in conducting and funding research.

However, none of those research projects requires a separate, Cabinet-level department." Hodel advocated turning over many of DOE's functions to the Interior Department, shifting nuclear weapons and waste cleanup to Defense, selling or transferring the laboratories to universities or foundations, and handing the research program to the National Sci-

The Budget Action Ahead

In a typical year in Congress, the appropriations process would have gotten under way by now. But the time the House of Representatives spent on the Republican party's "Contract with America" set the process back by more than a month. By tradition, House appropriators make the first move. They begin marking up bills and bringing these to the House floor before the Memorial Day recess, even if both houses have not agreed on a budget resolution. Now that the budget committees have agreed on a compromise resolution, which provides spending totals in the two budgets for each of the so-called budget functions (for example, function 050 deals with defense appropriations, function 250 with science, space and technology, and function 270 with energy), the process advances toward producing the 13 spending bills.

Although each of the 13 appropriations subcommittees in both chambers now has its spending allowance (known as the 602(b) allocations), there is little likelihood that the House will meet its traditional July Fourth deadline for initial passage of appropriations bills. This raises the odds of delays this fall. The process calls for each house to pass its own spending legislation, after which a House-Senate conference committee will agree on a huge, deficit-cutting "reconciliation" bill to send to the President's desk by the start of the new fiscal year on 1 October.