

WASHINGTON REPORTS

With Science Budgets Facing Debacle in FY 2000 Clinton's Science Adviser Calls for Action Now

The meeting in Room 248 of the Old Executive Office Building on the morning of 10 August was an anomaly. Here were President Clinton's science adviser, Neal Lane, two associate directors of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, the associate director for natural resources, energy, and science of the Office of Management and Budget, and a special assistant to the President for economic policy, who had summoned a score of lobbyists from scientific societies, universities and corporations to discuss the impending budget debacle for federal science programs in fiscal 2000, which begins on 1 October. "We were put on notice that unless we could somehow get Congress to alter its course in the next month," recalled one of the participants, "the millennial year will be a miserable one for scientific research."

In handing out a list of cutbacks made by the House Appropriations Committee in the President's R&D budget request for next year, Lane said the proposed reductions would "decimate" science at the nation's research universities and government laboratories. The cuts totaled \$1.8 billion less than the Clinton administration's request—in particular, \$1 billion was lopped off NASA, \$275 million slashed from the National Science Foundation (NSF), and \$116 million taken from Department of Energy (DOE) science programs. If the House has its way, said Lane, "tens of thousands" of faculty, researchers, and students will be threatened, and "young people will receive a negative message about a future career in science or engineering."

With the passage of a \$792 billion tax cut over the next ten years, Congress left on 6 August for its summer recess and set the stage for a high-stakes confrontation with President Clinton over government priorities in the strange new era of projected federal surpluses. The battle over the anticipated \$3 trillion windfall of tax surpluses among the proposed cuts, debt payoffs, and federal programs through the next decade is the most important of the many policy issues that will be debated this fall. So far in this second session of the 106th Congress, the parties have put less emphasis on legislation than on legerdemain. Congress has passed few bills, and the Republi-

can majority says it will force President Clinton to accept its budget priorities whether he likes it or not. Publicly, Clinton says he would like nothing better than a bipartisan compromise, if only Republicans would be more reasonable, but privately, his aides are girding for combat. The president insists he will veto the tax-cut bill and other bills that ignore his priorities.

Confrontations like this have occurred in the past. In 1995, Republicans took the brunt of the blame after a budget impasse led to a government



LANE: 'Confident' of a turn-around.

shutdown. Since then, Republicans have lost every veto battle with Clinton over the budget. Unlike the earlier fights, which took place in the shadow of huge fiscal deficits, the federal government is now enjoying record surpluses. But Washington is still operating under the rules of political austerity.

That is because of the spending ceilings imposed by the 1997 balanced-budget agreement between Clinton and Congress. Even now, neither wants to be the first to blink. The Republican strategy seems to rely on labeling certain things, like the census and financial help to drought-stricken farmers, as "emergencies" so that these are not governed by existing budget caps.

Only two of the 13 annual appropriations bills have cleared Congress. Those two account for just 2% of the total \$1.78 trillion federal budget for next year. The most difficult bills, for

Labor-Health and Human Services and Veteran Affairs-Housing and Urban Development and the Independent Agencies, are also the largest of the domestic spending bills and are therefore the hardest hit by the spending caps. The funding available for these bills is many billions of dollars below the amounts needed to sustain the programs at current levels, let alone meet the Clinton requests. Some House appropriators have been saying the best they can do is freeze funding for the National Institutes of Health, Pell Grants, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and cut other programs by 10% at least and 20% at most. Similarly, appropriators say the most NSF can expect from its bill is a freeze and that NASA may take a severe hit.

Just two weeks after NASA officials celebrated the 30th anniversary of the "giant leap for mankind" on the Moon and the launching of the Chandra x-ray telescope, the House appropriations subcommittee for VA-HUD slashed \$1.4 billion, or more than 10%, from the agency's current budget. In doing this, \$640 million was ripped from space science, endangering future missions to Mars and the Space Infrared Telescope Facility (SIRTF), scheduled for launch in 2001.

A few days after the subcommittee's draft appeared, the full House Appropriations Committee restored \$400 million to NASA's budget, rescuing SIRTF and the Mars missions, but leaving the space agency with a \$1 billion cut, or 7% below its current budget of \$13.7 billion. In its desperation, the committee had shifted \$400 million from funds for the Corporation for National and Community Service (AmeriCorps), another independent agency in the VA-HUD bill, to the space agency's budget. While NASA employees and space scientists were pleased with the additional allocation in this grim game of robbing Peter to pay Paul, others fear that by virtually killing AmeriCorps, a Clinton favorite, the bill will invite a presidential veto. NASA's science, aeronautics, and technology account, which funds most of the agency's research, would decline 12% to \$5 billion because of deep cuts in the Earth Science, Space Science, and Aerospace Technology programs.

The House measure would cancel several programs, including the Triana mission, which has attracted Republican opposition largely because it was championed by Vice President Gore. Space scientists have been reeling from the House committee's blow to their account by a \$163 million decline, or 7.7%, to \$2 billion, mainly because CONTOUR, a \$50 million comet mission, would be dropped altogether. "Not only are these cuts devastating to NASA's programs, they are a knife in the heart of employee morale," said Dan Goldin, NASA's administrator.

In the same bill, NSF emerged with what has been termed a "survival" budget, though some of its ambitious spending plans for next year would need to be scuttled. While most of the research directorates would hang on at this year's levels, the foundation's total budget would be cut 1.7% in the House plan, down \$64 million to \$3.6 billion. The full committee accepted the subcommittee's recommendation to reduce the president's request by \$274.6 million. The appropriators allowed only \$35 million of the \$146 million that had been sought for NSF's share of the administration's \$366 million multi-agency information technology initiative and nothing for a requested \$35 million terascale computer. They were put off by the cost of the IT² initiative and by the fear that NSF would favor one of its two existing supercomputer centers, at the University of California, San Diego, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in any competition for the new computer. Programs in the mathematics and physical sciences directorate would be funded at \$735 million, nearly \$20 million below the administration's request.

The House's allocations for NSF left the agency's director, Rita Colwell, in shock. "We're able and ready to do 21st century science and engineering, but we can't do it on a 20th century budget," she said in a statement. "While I ap-

preciate the very severe constraints the Congress has to work within, we need to redouble our efforts to show why investing in science, engineering, and technology should receive priority attention."

The proposed reductions in the budgets of NASA and NSF have called forth wistful memories of the Republican leadership when Newt Gingrich was House Speaker. A former history professor, Gingrich was a dynamic force behind the appropriations process for science, technology, and education, unlike his successor, Speaker Dennis Hastert of Illinois. Gingrich's concerns showed up as boosts for R&D budgets during his reign.

The House energy bill would provide \$15.6 billion for DOE, \$1.5 billion less than the Senate's version. The large difference between the two bills is certain to result in a troublesome conference. The House appropriation also withholds \$1 billion until Congress restructures the department's nuclear weapons programs or establishes a new semi-autonomous agency to manage those programs.

In the wake of growing congressional anger over charges of security breaches, health violations, and management failures at the weapons labs, House members of both parties have demanded that DOE needs to clean up its act. By a vote of 96-1, the Senate approved a semi-independent Agency for Nuclear Stewardship inside DOE, but the House report accompanying the appropriations bill goes further and advocates the creation of a new independent agency outside the department. Even if the restructuring occurs promptly, the bill would not allow the \$1 billion to be available until after next 30 June. Pete Domenici, the influential New Mexico Republican who heads the Senate Energy and Water Development Appropriations Subcommittee, argues that the resulting delay will disrupt DOE's stockpile stewardship program, which maintains the safety and

reliability of nuclear weapons without conducting underground tests.

In DOE's science account, the House would provide \$2.6 billion for R&D, a cut of 2.8% after adjusting for general reductions. Fusion research would receive \$245 million, an increase of 10.8% for fiscal 2000 after several years of flat or declining budgets. High energy physics would rise 1.3% to \$698 million and nuclear physics would ascend 5.3% to \$351 million. Within the basic energy sciences, however, the House bill would reduce funding for the Spallation Neutron Source, to be built at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, to \$68 million, down from the requested \$214 million. The bill calls for revised project estimates and management plans with clearer milestones before additional construction funds are provided.

Commerce Department funding for science and technology would be cut by \$420 million, or 15% below current levels, by House appropriators. The largest whacks at the department are at the National Institute of Standards and Technology's Advanced Technology Program, which would be eliminated and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, where most R&D programs would suffer, though the Senate has other ideas about funding both the ATP and NOAA.

At the meeting with science society representatives and others on 10 August, Lane said he was "confident" that the awful budget situation can be turned around "if America's research community makes its strong voice heard in the days ahead. Otherwise, if the cuts are allowed to stand, we will all be leading lesser lives in a lesser land." He then quoted President Clinton as having once said: "Cutting back on research at the dawn of a new century where research is more important than it has been for even the last 50 years would be like cutting back our defense budget at the height of the cold war."

IRWIN GOODWIN

Science Loses an Urbane Champion in Congress With Death of George Brown After 18 Terms

With the death on 15 July of George E. Brown Jr, who served in Congress for 36 years, science in the US has lost its most venerable political champion. At the age of 79, he was the oldest current member of the House of Representatives and the senior Democrat on the Science Committee. Brown served as the committee's chairman for four years (1991-95), until the Republicans returned to power in the House for the first time in 40 years. His death

was attributed to a rampant infection following surgery for a heart valve replacement.

Brown was known on Capitol Hill and in Washington scientific society circles as "Mr. Science." Upon his death, President Clinton issued a statement noting that Brown's "support for science was drawn from his deep belief that science and technology could help achieve a peaceful world and a just society." At a meeting of the National

Science Board on 29 July, a resolution was passed recognizing Brown as "more than a friend of science. . . . [He] was a fount of wisdom about how science and technology transform our lives and our understanding of it. As an advocate for space exploration and environmental protection, he challenged scientists and policymakers alike to consider the unanticipated consequences that future generations would face. As a champion of basic