News and Comment

Problems of NIH: An Examination of How Other Federal Agencies Handle Congressional Relations

Last week in this space it was pointed out that NIH has been seemingly indifferent to the game of winning friends and influencing people in Congress.

There are many reasons for NIH's behavior in this respect, not the least of which is that, up until last year, NIH had smooth congressional relations without even trying. Medical research was, and still is, a congressional favorite, and most agency heads, outside of the defense field, would happily settle for NIH's congressional problems. Nevertheless, in comparison to the blank-check, take-it-on-faith attitude that once prevailed in Congress, medical research is in a sort of political trouble, and therefore it might be useful to examine the methods employed by other agencies to keep Congress on their side. Although these methods from time to time involve such hanky-panky as throwing a contract this way or that way to win the favor of an important congressional figure, by and large they consist of nothing more than a recognition of the fact that people are more inclined to sympathize with that which they understand. The substance of medical research cannot be readily translated for the lay member of Congress, and this, of course, presents something of a problem. Nevertheless, the nonprofessional can be taken by the hand and introduced to some of the complexities and beauties of research; he can be led to know more than he knew before simply by looking at equipment; and finally, if nothing else, he can be brought to an awareness of how much he doesn't know, which might be a very useful thing in the case of those who have fixed their sights on NIH's budget. It is a fact, though, that NIH has never undertaken a serious educational effort of this sort, and, while it is difficult to pinpoint the springs of its current congressional troubles, the situation hasn't been helped by NIH's aloofness from the rank and file as well as from the leadership of Congress.

As might be expected, the Defense Department and the individual military services do things differently, and if congressmen have any problem in this area, it's one of keeping the military representatives from cluttering up the office rather than finding them when they have a question. A typical case would be that of a western congressman we recently met, a freshman whose constituency and committee assignments are as remote from military affairs as you can get. Before he had had time to move his trappings into his office, the military liaison people had been around inviting him to take a ride on a Polaris submarine and to crack the sound barrier in a fighter plane. They also assured him that if he had any problems involving constituents in military service, both the Senate and the House office buildings were staffed with officers who would give him a sympathetic hearing. (The Army keeps three colonels and three lieutenant colonels stationed in the members' office buildings; the Navy has two captains, two commanders, and a marine colonel, and the Air Force has two colonels and three majors. The military services even supply doctors to staff the office of the Capitol's attending physician, where care is available for even those members who vote against federal involvement in medical service.)

Since the military services have the largest stake in maintaining congressional affection, they expend the greatest effort. But other agencies also act on the premise that it pays to keep Congress abreast of their activities. The space agency, for example, is always ready to oblige any winter-weary congressman who feels that a look at sunny Cape Canaveral would put him in a better position, or a kinder frame of mind, to appraise the space program. The Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, whatever its problems and inadequacies may be, has managed to touch base with large numbers of congressional offices, and even the faltering civil defense effort has made a mighty effort at least to explain itself to individual congressmen. None of these agencies station liaison personnel on Capitol Hill, and there is no reason why NIH should go to that extreme, if for no other reason than that there wouldn't be enough business to keep them occupied. But between ignoring the Capitol and stationing a staff there, there is a lot of territory for legitimate missionary work.

Now, all this might seem to be undignified and unsuitable business for medical researchers and their administrators, and there is no question that it is easy to lose sight of the thin line between legitimate representation and hucksterism. But, first of all, at a practical level, it might just as well be recognized that medical research now has to compete with other important national requirements and that there is nothing illicit about making certain that its case for support is properly broadcast. More fundamentally, however, it is difficult to see how any violence is done to the democratic process when recipients of federal funds make a reasonable and honest effort to tell their political leaders how they are using the public's money. Such an effort, of course, is made in NIH's annual appropriations hearings, but these are conducted before only a handful of Representatives and Senators, and the printed record that results is sufficiently forbidding in size (863 pages the last time around in the House) to scare off even the most conscientious member.

Relations with PHS

A major part of the problem is that while NIH is the largest single activity within the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, it is many administrative layers from the top. Its parent organization is the Public Health Service, but there have been many times when PHS officials have been chagrined to see their supposedly subordinate research arm riding free and easy through the congressional appropriations mill while the PHS budget itself has been subjected to a clumsily wielded knife. In reviewing their current difficulties with Congress, some NIH officials com-

plain that their appeals for help have generally gone unheeded in the PHS and the Department. The situation is said to be somewhat improved since Anthony J. Celebrezze succeeded Abraham J. Ribicoff as HEW secretary, but NIH is not expecting to attain salvation through the good offices of its departmental superiors. "They are concerned that we are in trouble," one NIH official commented recently, "but that's because trouble is a nuisance, and they're for peace at any price."

As a result, whatever is going to be done politically for NIH will in large part have to be done by NIH itself, but, unless the preparations have been exceedingly well cloaked, it seems that nothing much is in the works. Not only is it difficult to find many congressmen who have even a vague notion of what NIH is doing, but it is also difficult to see any effort by NIH to tell its story to the general public. NIH is extremely cooperative with writers who come its way looking for information about medical research, but, in its usually demure fashion, it makes little effort to initiate contact with the public through the press. It does not have to emulate the space agency's practice of deluging the press with news releases every time an astronaut is fitted for a new helmet, but again, within the boundaries of good taste, it could legitimately tell the nation about the useful and interesting work that it is doing. One measure of its failure to do this is that it is a rare layman who knows what "NIH" stands for; at the same time, it is a rare one who doesn't know what "NASA" stands for, although it would not be difficult to make the case that of the two, NIH is the more deserving of the public's gratitude.

Press Activities

Some of this reserve undoubtedly arises from the fact that parts of the press have an appetite for "scientific breakthroughs" and a reluctance for letting the details get in the way of a good story. Many scientists have had their fingers burned and their reputations clouded by fantastic popularized accounts of their work. As a result, there is a tendency to keep the press—which means the public—away from many research activities. Unquestionably, there are grounds for wariness, but the quality of science writing is changing a lot faster than many scientists seem to realize. Many newspapers and magazines are now staffed with well-trained, responsible science writers who can be trusted to present an accurate and interesting description of what is going on in the laboratory. The apparent failure to recognize this is another measure of NIH's poor approach to communicating with the public that is footing the bill. NIH responds when it is asked for information, but it seems to think that there is something unsavory or dangerous about going out and blowing its horn. A more reasonable proposition, however, is that in the current competition for national support, silence is the most hazardous choice.—D. S. GREENBERG

Scientists on Space: Senate Group Hears Criticism and Support for Manned Lunar Landing Program

The Senate Aeronautical and Space Sciences Committee served as a forum this week for what was probably the freest and most far-reaching public discussion to date of the scientific community's attitude toward the space program.

In large part, the hearings originated from concern over anti-space rumblings among scientists and the determination of the committee's new chairman, Clinton Anderson (D.–N. M.), to give the committee a more effective role in space policy deliberations. Under its late chairman, Robert Kerr (D.–Okla.), the committee was never accused of raising any hard questions about NASA.

The most biting attacks on the lunar landing program were raised by Philip H. Abelson, editor of *Science*, and Polykarp Kusch, chairman of the Columbia University physics department.

While agreeing that a manned lunar landing should eventually be carried out, Abelson argued that "most of the important scientific questions concerning the moon and other planets could be studied soon at relatively low cost employing unmanned vehicles." Furthermore, he said, while it is claimed that "vast frontiers of knowledge" will be opened by putting a man in space, "no one has delineated any impressive body of questions which are to be studied."

"Making man a part of the scientific exploration of space has two important drawbacks," he continued. "It increases costs and it will probably slow down, at least for some years, the pace of getting valuable results. . . . Our recent Mariner II probe to Venus cost a few tens of millions. To send man on a comparable mission might cost a hundred billion dollars and could not be done for years."

Abelson also raised questions about the emphasis that NASA is placing on scientific research. "One of the most puzzling aspects of the NASA Program," he said, "is the continued failure to land electronic equipment on the moon. After a trajectory of more than 100 million miles, Mariner II scored a fine success in exploring Venus. Why can't we hit the moon, which is comparatively in our own backyard? Why was there insufficient backup of the five Ranger vehicles which failed? I have the feeling," he added, "that scientific exploration of the moon has been accorded a low priority, that the Apollo program is distorting scientific priorities and at least indirectly slowing progress."

Kusch, too, said that manned space exploration is a legitimate eventual goal, but he questioned the high priority that has been assigned to landing men on the moon and returning them in this decade. And he suggested that earthly needs, "the preservation and repair of our continent," might be a more appropriate goal for a national effort on the scale of the moon landing.

"I do not think that the present space exploration effort can be justified on the grounds that it will have a visible effect on the lives of people other than through the pride they may feel in its achievement or the vicarious sense of adventure that they may experience."

"It is my belief," he continued, "that the present space program attempts too much too fast. There is not enough time for profound thought, for imagination to play over the demanding problems that occur. . . . I find it difficult to believe that the exploration of space is a more compelling goal than the exploration of the planet that we inhabit. My very real sympathy for the space program does not extend to a belief that it should be the overriding national effort at this time."

Speaking in support of the present space effort, Simon Ramo, vice chairman of the board of directors of Thompson Ramo Wooldridge, Inc., argued that the nation has the resources to support a large space program and that, in the context of the cold war, it cannot afford to drop