A New Round in Fountain versus NIH

Conflict between Representative L. H. Fountain (D–N.C.), chairman of the House subcommittee on intergovernmental relations, and the National Institutes of Health broke out anew last week when Fountain charged that a defense of NIH grant programs contained "untrue or misleading statements" and endorsed "flagrantly irresponsible" practices. Fountain's subcommittee has conducted three major inquiries into NIH operations since 1961. The latest resulted in a report issued last October that attacked NIH's administration of grant programs in language that was notable for its bitterness and hostility (*Science*, 3 November 1967). The Department of Health, Education and Welfare, NIH's parent organization, issued a mild rebuttal to the Fountain committee's charges late in February (*Science*, 1 March), but Fountain was clearly not pacified. Last week he dispatched an eight-page letter to Wilbur J. Cohen, secretary of HEW, charging that the report defending NIH was "not fully responsive" to the original charges and that it sought "by skillful use of language . . . to portray some weaknesses as virtues."

Fountain wrote that he was "astounded" at the explanation of why NIH awarded grants to two schools under the new Health Sciences Advancement Award program a full 7 months before the program was publicly announced. NIH had explained that it needed to develop experience through a small pilot program before extending the program to a large number of institutions. But Fountain dismissed the explanation as "attempting to rationalize non-competitive awards to two handpicked schools." He added: "Administrative flexibility is unquestionably a valid need in the administrative process, but it cannot legitimately be extended in a democratic society to embrace favoritism and the dispensation of special privilege."

Fountain also charged that HEW's defense of NIH "glossed over" the questions he raised about the wisdom of awarding a single 5-year $22.6-million grant to the Sloan-Kettering Institute for Cancer Research to replace 44 separate grants and contracts previously in effect. The Fountain committee contended that the grant will remove a large sum of money from the competitive pool. The committee further predicts that such a "single-instrument" grant will result in the government's supporting a lower quality of research. The committee stated that 41 percent of Sloan-Kettering's research grant applications were disapproved by NIH review bodies in 1964 and 1965, but under a single large grant, the committee said, Sloan-Kettering will almost certainly have the discretion to finance such projects with federal funds. Fountain does not say the "single-instrument" approach is "inherently good or bad," but he argues that "such a major departure from previously authorized forms of support should be formally acted on by the Congress."

Fountain does not make an item-by-item attack on HEW's defense of NIH, but he does charge that a statement defending the quality of research supported by NIH is "categorically and demonstrably false," while another statement, concerning large overpayments to Health Research Inc. for indirect costs, is branded "incorrect," and a third statement, also relating to indirect costs, is deemed "not responsive." Fountain also questions whether NIH is taking effective action to ensure that its advisory councils are not dominated by a favored few scientists. The congressman urges Cohen to take "prompt corrective action" on the various problems cited above and he warns Cohen that his subcommittee will "closely monitor the health research programs until such time as your department takes decisive action to remedy the weaknesses disclosed by the committee."

The effect of Fountain's latest attack is simply to remind NIH that its operations are under a scrutiny that is continuous, skeptical, and perhaps without parallel in relations between a congressional committee and a federal research agency. This situation is not likely to help much as NIH shops for a director to replace the retiring James Shannon.

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suggest, is that toxic aromatics evaporate very rapidly from the surface of seawater. Otherwise, as the report puts it, "the biological consequences in the English Channel would have been vastly worse than they were."

The worst sufferers from the oil were sea birds; the heaviest casualties were suffered by diving birds—guillemots, razorbills, cormorants, and shags. Gulls seem to have learned to avoid oil, and very few were affected. Ornithologists have reported a decline in the number of auks and other diving birds breeding on southern British coasts in the last 30 years and have attributed it to oil pollution. Total casualties of the *Torrey Canyon* oil were estimated at 20,000 guillemots and 5000 razorbills. A sad aspect of the oil fouling of sea birds was the failure of rescue operations. The British are unrivaled bird lovers, and a big effort at cleaning birds was made by the government and by voluntary agencies and individuals. But of nearly 8000 birds recorded as treated, only 450 were alive by mid-April and only about 1 percent of the birds treated were expected to be returned to the sea.

Little Effect on Seals

Contrary to some predictions, effects on offshore fisheries seem to have been negligible. The seal population does not appear to be seriously affected, although some breeding caves were badly polluted by oil and scientists suggest that ill effects may become apparent later. No commercial shellfish ground was affected by oil, as such grounds were in France, and care was taken not to spray detergent near such beds.

France's battle with *Torrey Canyon* oil was different from Britain's, in part because the French had more time and perhaps because they profited from the British experience. The main difference was that the French shunned detergents. Oil came ashore on the coast of Brittany in higher concentrations than in most parts of Cornwall, but the French relied on mechanical means of removal and such natural effects as waves, tides, and bacterial degradation. Oil did do considerable damage to Breton shellfish beds, but these are expected to recover. At sea, a big patch of oil in the Bay of Biscay was successfully treated with powdered chalk. The chalk binds the oil into particles which sink to the bottom. The French estimate that 3000 tons of chalk will sink 20,000 tons of oil.

The two British reports give the im-