

Project Themis: Budget Cuts, Critics Cause Phase Out

Project Themis, the Department of Defense's program to create new academic "centers of excellence" by broadening distribution of defense research funds to universities, is succumbing to budget pressures and to opposition in the academic community to DOD involvement in university research.

There are no funds for Themis in the budget for fiscal year 1971, which began on 1 July. This does not mean that all research in centers established with Project Themis funds has ground to a halt. Some Themis projects are still operating on money obligated in earlier years, and financing for a substantial number of centers established with Themis funds has been found elsewhere. As a separate entity, however, Themis, if not quite dead, is far along in the process of fading away.

Announced by then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in January 1967, Project Themis was officially subtitled "A Program to Strengthen the Nation's Academic Institutions." Themis was devised to respond to congressional demands for wider distribution of federal research funds and, specifically, to President Johnson's September 1965 directive instructing federal agencies to find new ways to help universities which were trying to establish themselves as research institutions.

To compete successfully for Themis funds, applicants had to propose a set of related research tasks focused on a major scientific or engineering problem. The typical Themis project was expected to be budgeted at about \$200,000 a year, and to involve 8 to 10 faculty members and 16 to 20 graduate students. It was anticipated that Themis support would lead to the creation of new "centers" in specialized areas of research.

Encouraging "have not" institutions to establish graduate programs was a major aim of the program, and Themis support was "step-funded" over the first 3 years so that institutions without large research programs could make commitments to faculty and graduate students on a 3-year basis.

Themis was originally expected by Pentagon officials to grow into a \$45-million-a-year program after 3 years. The Themis budget was \$19.9 million in its first year (fiscal year 1967), rose to \$27.9 million in FY 1968, peaked at \$28.5 million in FY 1969, and was cut sharply to \$12.4 million in FY 1970, which ended 30 June.

Beginning with the FY 1970 budget, no "new starts" were provided for, so FY 1971 is the last year for which funds under the Themis program are to be made available.

Over the life of the program some 1087 proposals for projects were evaluated and 118 Themis centers were started. Total spending on Themis amounted to \$88.7 million.

Project Themis was masterminded by DOD's Directorate of Defense Research and Engineering, headed by John S. Foster, but was funded through the research offices of the separate military services—Army, Navy, and Air Force—with a few projects financed by DOD's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA).

Defense officials had opened the competition for Themis funds by inviting applications for support of work in research areas where DOD saw it had identi-

able needs. The initial ones were detection, surveillance, navigation, and control; energy and power; information processing systems; technology of military vehicles; material science; environmental sciences; and social and behavioral sciences. Projects in other areas were acceptable if they served military needs.

From the start, DOD made the quid-pro-quo basis of Themis explicit. In a 1967 release the purposes of Themis were described as "1) the development of new centers of excellence capable of solving important Defense problems in the years ahead, and 2) a wider geographical distribution of Defense research funds, favoring institutions which have not heretofore received substantial opportunity and financial support in the field of Defense research."

For a variety of reasons, a satisfactory postmortem on Themis at present is a virtually impossible task. Military research offices haven't made up their minds about which Themis projects, or rather which former Themis projects, will be continued, curtailed, or ended in the current budget year. Work started under Themis is difficult to trace, since projects formerly funded under Themis have in many cases been transferred to other budget headings. And a number of Themis centers have become research contractors indistinguishable from other contractors with which they compete.

The ultimate liquidation of Themis was predictable, since it was conceived as a "development" program, but the decline and fall certainly came more precipitously than its Pentagon creators expected. The demise of Themis was caused by the budget squeeze and growing hostility to DOD support of university research, in proportions which are hard to determine.

Reaction to Themis started early. In the spring of 1967, the American Association of University Professors expressed concern about the "large involvement of the military establishment in financial support" of the universities and asked for an examination of the ways in which this involvement affected the "freedom and autonomy of academic society," in a resolution which Themis was said to have helped inspire. *New Left Notes*, that summer, called attention to Themis, urging it be seized upon as part of the "issue of university complicity in the war." Subsequently, opposition mounted inside and outside Congress until, last year, Congress passed the so-called Mansfield Amendment requiring that DOD-supported research have a demonstrated application to the defense mission.

Defense Department officials had anticipated criticism of Themis at the outset by barring classified work in Themis projects and also by insisting that applications for Themis support carry the university administrators' specific assurance that the proposed project was consistent with the long-range aims of their university. But, in the climate prevailing, Themis became a handy symbol of DOD involvement and a target for critics on campus and in Congress.

Ironically, when DOD, which has long been a major and unobtrusive patron of university research, mounted its first major program candidly labeled as aid to the universities, this new visibility fatally increased its vulnerability.—JOHN WALSH