

FAS Attacks Politicization of NIH

The firing of Robert S. Stone as director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) predictably has touched off a hue and cry about the dangers of politicizing science. And, it has provided scientists with an occasion for speaking out against anyone except themselves making decisions about the allocation of resources for research.

A couple of weeks ago, the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) seized upon Stone's firing as an opportunity to get publicity when it called a press conference in its Capitol Hill townhouse to "deplore" the firing and the "politicization of NIH research."

In a statement prepared for the event, FAS Director Jeremy Stone (no relation to Robert Stone) said there are many signs that NIH is "falling under an unwise kind and degree of political control," and went on to criticize the fact that there are times when NIH has to take orders from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) or from top officials in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). "We believe, at the Federation of American Scientists, that scientists engaged in basic research should not be told how to run their business. . . . We want our scientists at NIH left, as much as possible, alone to do their thing." With \$2 billion of public money?

Stone was not on stage alone for the protest. The FAS, which prides itself on having half of the country's Nobel laureates in science among its members, brought out three of them from NIH to add a touch of glamor to the event. Christian Anfinsen, Julius Axelrod, and Marshall Nirenberg were there, as were two other NIH'ers, Robert Goldberger and Earl Stadtman.* Citing the need for what they termed "stability" in the NIH directorship, they called for repeal of the 3-year-old law that makes the NIH director a presidential appointee.† They stopped far short of calling for Stone's reinstatement, however. Instead, they called on the President to name a new director promptly, selecting him with the advice of organizations such as their own. That way, they felt, he would be showing his "commitment to a politically independent and more effective NIH. . . ."

Jeremy Stone suggested another way to secure NIH's independence—sever it from HEW and link it with the National Science Foundation (NSF). However, one can hardly imagine NSF warming to that idea since it would surely be dominated by the biomedical giant. The FAS plans to survey tens of thousands of biomedical scientists to see what they think of the idea, or any others for making NIH independent.

The question of NIH's independence is a sore one in Washington, particularly because individuals in HEW and even NIH backers on Capitol Hill see it as evidence of the arrogance of scientists who want public money without public accountability. It is a subject that made Assistant Secretary for Health Charles C. Edwards, who

has resigned effective 15 January, see red; it was at the heart of a bitter controversy he had with former NIH Deputy Director John Sherman (*Science*, 1 March). Edwards was among those who think that because of the size of the NIH budget and because of the demands on health money from other sectors, NIH simply cannot expect to be left in happy isolation to make its own choices without regard for political reality.

While scientists insist that they really are not against telling the public what they are doing, they are adamant about the need for what Jeremy Stone called "research tranquility." Because of political forces, "the concentration span of our biomedical scientists is being periodically broken to no good purpose," he declared.

It is probably too bad that the FAS publicly tied its grievances to the Stone firing. During questioning by the press on the subject, it became apparent that the assembled scientists knew very little about the reasons for Stone's ouster and had little firm evidence that the grounds were "political." Even though he had been head of NIH for a year and a half, they had, they admitted, no clear knowledge of his policies, only that he was, as Anfinsen put it, "an NIH'er, not a HEW'er."

That is, Stone developed a vague reputation for defending NIH against the evil powers at HEW. But just how he did so, or on what issues, is certainly not generally known. The FAS scientists did not know, for example, how their director felt about research "balance" and the dramatic expansion of the cancer program. In his 18 months in office, Stone never became a recognized leader of either the NIH campus or the biomedical community.

If Stone was not the issue with the FAS scientists, what was? The independence of NIH. As the question was bandied about, it became clear, for example, that the political power and monetary dominance of the National Cancer Institute over the rest of NIH is as much a source of psychological discontent as ever. There is considerable resentment of the war on cancer, particularly because it originated outside NIH (although not entirely outside the scientific community). The FAS scientists issued the now familiar pronouncements about how one cannot target research and how good projects in areas other than cancer are going unfunded. But they had no concrete examples of the breakdown of research. Goldberger, who is in the cancer institute, said, "I don't think we can talk about any specific project. It's a matter of atmosphere."

The atmosphere in the room during all this was tinged with frustration as the discussion went round and round. Granted, it is difficult for anyone to express the importance of such intangibles as "research tranquility" and the virtues of scientists making their own decisions about how to spend the public's money in the public interest. But scientists seem to have a knack for putting it in ways that sound self-serving.

This recent attempt to persuade the outside world of the virtues of an independent NIH will not convince anyone but the faithful.—BARBARA J. CULLITON

* Franklin Neva of NIH also signed the scientists' statement of protest.
† Under a provision passed in July 1974, the NIH director must be appointed by the President and approved by the Senate, which could hold hearings on the appointment if it wished.