

Political Fracas over Peer Review Is Factor in Firing of NIAAA Director

Capping a bitter fight among Carter Administration health officials, Capitol Hill, and constituents of the Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration (ADAMHA) over control of the agency's peer review of research proposals, the Administration recently fired Ernest Noble as director of the National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse (NIAAA).

Administration officials have also told Robert DuPont, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) since 1974, that he will soon be expected to step aside, so that a Carter Administration appointee may take his place. The departure of DuPont will mean that, in the 5 months that Gerald Klerman, a psychiatrist from Harvard, has been ADAMHA administrator, there will have been a clean sweep of the directorships of the three public health institutes in his agency.*

As in the earlier dismissal of Bertram Brown as director of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the abruptness and timing of Noble's dismissal caught the Washington research community by surprise and prompted some criticism of Klerman and his boss, Health, Education, and Welfare Secretary Joseph Califano. On the face of it, the firing was consistent with Califano's principle of turnover in the top positions in his department, as publicly enunciated

at the time of Brown's dismissal (*Science*, 20 January). Indeed, both Klerman and Califano have insisted repeatedly that Noble was dismissed only because new initiatives are being planned for NIAAA, and an infusion of new blood was needed to implement them—statements that have earned the pair nicknames as the “vampires” in some sectors. Klerman has stated that the new initiatives will be in alcoholism prevention, teenage drinking problems, and the fetal alcohol syndrome, all of which may involve new cooperation between the institutes.

Despite these protestations, the circumstances of Noble's firing suggest that it was prompted as much by politics as it was by a desire for new programs. According to congressional sources and well-informed institute officials, Califano and Klerman may have intended to replace the NIAAA director at some point in the future, but the firing on 27 April was prompted by disagreement over Klerman's plan to centralize peer review for all three institutes in ADAMHA. Specifically, it is believed that Noble, who actively opposed the plan, was fired in retribution for the plan's defeat. Califano and Klerman had been forced by congressional pressure to give up the proposal on the evening prior to Klerman's request that Noble step aside.

The fight over the peer review centralization plan had its roots in an extraordinary memorandum from Klerman to Undersecretary of Health Julius Richmond. In the 22 February memo, Klerman cited several studies, such as the 1976 report of the President's Biomedical Research Panel, which determined that close ties between program directors and peer review committees within the three ADAMHA institutes had led to a variety of ills in the contract and grant review process. Klerman said these ills included the “difficulty of adequate monitoring to assure that program staff bias or conflict of interest does not enter into the review process, inconsistent and sometimes conflicting advice to potential applicants,

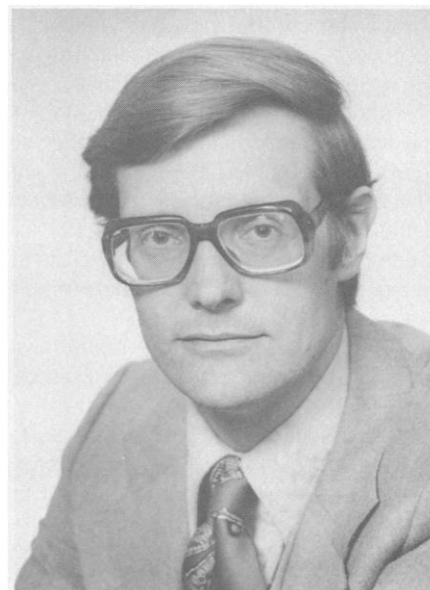
[and] continuing claims by individuals and institutions of mishandling of grant applications.” The memo suggested the review system be centralized within ADAMHA, where reviewers with expertise in each of the institutes' fields of interest would serve together on the committees. In and of itself, the proposal was not revolutionary: Its effect would be to bring the ADAMHA peer review system into line with that at the National Institutes of Health. Moreover, several highly regarded groups, including the President's Commission on Mental Health, had already suggested it, and much of the staff in the various institutes supported it.

What was unusual about the proposal is that Klerman made it official without consulting with anyone outside of a small circle of staff within ADAMHA; what made the memorandum itself extraordinary is that Klerman included in it some brutally frank suggestions about how to manipulate the issue in order to circumvent the likely resistance to his proposal. The memo read, in part:

While it is likely that some segments of the professional constituency of ADAMHA—specifically, psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers—will be allied in opposition to this move, it is expected that the scientific constituencies among these groups will give it strong support. It is probable that the most vociferous opposition will come from such organizational constituencies as the National Council on Alcoholism. To allay some of the concerns of these groups we would maintain the names and thus the visibility of the Minority Programs Review Committee and the Drug Abuse and Alcoholism Community Programs Review Committees. It is believed that these constituencies are primarily interested in the service components of the programs, and this move may assist in demonstrating that the intent is not to diminish the visibility of special interests.



Ernest Noble



Robert DuPont

*ADAMHA was formed in 1973 to coordinate the activities of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse, and the National Institute on Mental Health.

As one congressional staff member noted, "When you're new in town, as Klerman is, you don't realize that Washington is like a sieve." In less than a week, copies of the memo were in the hands of nearly every one of the groups cited above, and staff members of the congressional committees that oversee ADAMHA's policies and budgets had received nearly a dozen copies through the mail in unmarked envelopes.

Klerman's forecast of which groups were likely to oppose the proposal was accurate, and this made the memo sting all that much more when the groups had an opportunity to read it. The constituencies that expressed the greatest outrage were those in the field of alcoholism, who interpreted the excerpt quoted above to mean that Klerman thought he might allay their opposition by offering them nothing more than a sop in the form

of the minority grant program. Their opposition centered on the proposal to permit researchers from the other fields within the institutes—mental health and drug abuse—to participate in the peer review of applications for grants from NIAAA. Ernest Noble told *Science* that the constituencies of his agency "felt the proposal would lead to a fragmentation of alcoholism research, that alcoholism would suffer from a lack of attention, and that proposals would be reviewed by those without expertise in the alcoholism field—who therefore were incapable of judging the merits of the applications."

One researcher explained that "most people, including many scientists outside of our field, have yet to accept alcoholism as a legitimate illness and not a moral problem. The result has been that whenever we are funded through a joint arrangement, we don't get any of the

funds"—a perception that prompted the constituencies to push for the separation of NIAAA from NIMH in 1973, and apparently the major reason for efforts to safeguard the institute's independence now. Spokesmen for several of the alcoholism groups also pointed out that winning a share of HEW's budget has been a struggle, and remains an uphill battle (NIAAA receives 18 percent of ADAMHA's funds, NIMH 54 percent, and NIDA 28 percent).

By its variance, the view of the controversy by researchers in other fields largely justifies this defensiveness. "The alcoholism constituencies are nothing but a bunch of worried feudal chieftains," said one scientist who went on to say, "The ones that oppose the changes are the ones who are getting grants now. Most of them are probably afraid that their research proposals will not stand

Briefing

House Fiddles with the Budget While Interest Groups Burn

Last February, President Carter submitted his budget proposals for 1979, to begin what essentially was the first of three acts that comprise the play—both comedy and drama—that is the congressional budget process. The play has now completed its second act, with the markup of appropriations in the House. The result is that each actor has become considerably more frantic at the prospect of being upstaged in the Senate, where most of the remaining action takes place. The props in the current scene are Draconian importunings, and the musical accompaniment is the moaning and groaning of wounded institutions.

Although the denouement has yet to be written, the House has long been regarded as preeminent in appropriations. What has happened there to the Administration's proposals for science, research, and development may well determine the government's ultimate munificence in these areas.

To at least one group with a special interest in the science budget, the changes wrought thus far in the House represent a disintegration of the President's plan for substantial increases in funding for basic research. According to an official of the Association of American Universities, "Carter promised real increases averaging five percent across a dozen

agencies, but the cumulative impact of actions in the House has been to diminish these substantially." Others have declared the evidence less than clear-cut, and noted that behind each instance where funds for basic research appeared to have been cut lay seemingly unrelated explanations.

Thus far, the unkindest cut of all was the complete elimination of funds for competitive basic research grants provided by the Department of Agriculture. The program was approved only 2 years ago, and was preceded by several years of strenuous efforts to overcome traditional congressional favoritism toward formula (noncompetitive) grants for applied research at land-grant colleges and agricultural research stations. The competitive program was supported by many in the biological community who saw a need for more innovation and excellence in agricultural research, but it was not welcomed by those in Congress who thought it would lead to an ultimate diminution of the formula grants. Last year, the House slashed the funding request for competitive grants by more than half, and finally compromised with the Senate at \$15 million.

This year, congressmen on the agriculture appropriations subcommittee, led by Jamie Whitten (D-Miss.), did not have to look far for a confirmation of their fears about a shift from formula to competitive grants. In the Administration's budget proposal, competitive grant funds were slated for a doubling to \$30 million; at the same time, formula grants were

scheduled for a decrease of \$11 million. According to a committee staff member, most congressmen—as well as many constituents in the land-grant colleges—considered those amounts to be close enough for it to "appear as if Peter was being robbed to pay Paul." During hearings on the appropriation, Agriculture officials attempted to deny a connection between the two adjustments, but whether the connection was real or apparent, the damage had been done. At one point, Whitten asked, "How am I going to judge it except by how it looks?" The subcommittee not only restored the \$11 million in formula grant funds, but in apparent retribution, excised entirely the \$30 million in competitive grants.

Private institutions were not entirely shortchanged in the agriculture markup. The subcommittee added \$21 million for a human nutrition research center at Tufts University. The president of Tufts is nutritionist Jean Mayer. In other actions, however, the subcommittee deleted \$13 million in funds for contractual research, redirecting it to in-house agriculture labs.

NASA Seeing Stars, but Not from Space Telescope

If the cuts in Agriculture caused the most pain, those in the budget of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) left the deepest gash.

up to rigorous scientific scrutiny.”

As with many such bureaucratic contretemps, the resolution occurred quietly on Capitol Hill, and reflected more than anything else an imbalance in the amount and proficiency of private lobbying by both sides. In this circumstance, the alcoholism constituency gained some support from the psychological community, which suspected from the manner Klerman pushed the proposal forward that it was a grab for additional power on his behalf. Psychologists have been wary about Klerman, who has the background and beliefs of a psychiatrist and a reputation as a take-charge administrator, since his appointment (*Science*, 26 August 1977).

In any event, in taking their case to the Hill, constituents of NIAAA found easy access and ready support in the offices of two congressmen, Senator Harrison Wil-

liams (D-N.J.) and Representative Edward Patten (D-N.J.). Senator Williams, as well as his top legislative assistant in this area, is a recovered alcoholic, and firmly committed to preserving the Washington niche that NIAAA has been able to whittle out. Williams also is chairman of the committee on Human Resources, which oversees ADAMHA policy, and it was in this capacity that he wrote to Klerman and Califano early in March. In the letter, Williams demanded an explanation for the proposed changes, threatened to conduct hearings, and suggested that peer review procedures be centralized within each institute and not at the ADAMHA level. This, he said, would remove the influence of institute program directors, but not at the potential expense of any one discipline.

Representative Patten exercised his influence for a different reason and from

an alternative power base. The Center of Alcohol Studies at Rutgers University, which received \$1.2 million in federal contracts last year, mostly from NIAAA, is in Patten's district, and its administrators were among those who opposed the proposal. As a member of the Appropriations Subcommittee that must approve ADAMHA's budget, Patten questioned Klerman at length during the hearings, and told him flatly, "I don't like the heads of departments not running them and [not] setting policy and I don't like the centralization of grants and contracts. I don't agree with what you've said." He pointed out that it all appeared to contravene language in ADAMHA's authorizing legislation, and concluded, "Remember what I said, Doctor, that centralization in my judgment conflicts. . . . It is bad enough to get some of these heads of Institutes en-

Briefing

Overall, the appropriations subcommittee on independent agencies, headed by Representative Edward Boland (D-Mass.), cut \$37.7 million from the NASA budget, including \$12.9 million earmarked for R & D.

The biggest single project to be axed was the \$20 million teleoperator retrieval system, a remotely controlled booster engine that NASA had intended to attach to the Skylab satellite in order to prevent its uncontrolled fall to earth next year (*Science*, 7 April). The project was cut because the subcommittee judged that the space shuttle, which would be used to affix the booster, would not be able to reach Skylab before it comes down in the autumn of 1979.

This month, 1 week before the Senate must reach its own decision on whether the booster should be funded, NASA scientists will attempt to reorient the satellite by command from the earth and extend its life-span. If successful, they will send to the Senate what is known on Capitol Hill as a reclama—a plea for one house to restore what the other has cut (in this case, funding for the booster).

Three other projects may be casualties of the shuttle's problems and delays if the House prevails. Reflecting congressional concern over recent malfunctions of the shuttle engine, the subcommittee directed that \$30 million be set aside for potential cost overruns on the project. Money for what already has been dubbed the "shuttle slush fund" was directed to be drawn from:

- the space telescope (a cut of \$15

million, or 20 percent of its budget);

- the Jupiter orbiter probe (\$10 million, or 15 percent of its budget); and
- the solar polar mission (\$5 million, or 50 percent of its start-up cost).

"In effect, they want us to hold two missions hostage to unforeseen problems with the shuttle," a NASA budget official said. "One mission, the Jupiter orbiter probe, may have to be scrapped entirely because the launch time cannot easily be delayed. We have been placed in a perplexing situation."

As one consolation, the agency found greater support for construction of a fifth shuttle orbiter in Congress than it had with the President. Four million dollars were added to fund development of enough shuttle hardware to keep the construction as a viable option. Also, \$7 million was added to support aeronautical research, and \$4 million was added to begin development of a satellite capable of taking stereoscopic pictures of the earth's surface, to assist in mineral exploration.

Health Institutes

Get Major Boost

Other federal agencies might take a lesson from the National Institutes of Health, which are notoriously successful at gaining crucial congressional sympathy during the budget process. Who, after all, can vote for dread disease? The posi-

tive nature of their mission is usually played to the hilt during hearings, and congressmen may be subtly reminded that the recipients of grants and contracts are spread across the national map of political districts. Even without Administration requests for major funding increases, Congress has been known to boost the appropriations substantially.

This year in the House subcommittee on health, education, and welfare, the story was familiar. President Carter had recommended an increase of \$74 million, and the subcommittee tacked on another \$268 million. Each institute received a share of the increase, with the largest amount—\$53 million—going to the Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.

The National Cancer Institute, which in recent years has always received the lion's share of NIH increases, ranks fourth on the House list this time with a proposed increase of \$31 million. General Medical Sciences would get an additional \$40 million; the arthritis institute is slated for a \$38.5 million boost.

The House also added \$37 million for a major new building to house the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. The addition sets the stage for a fight in a House-Senate conference committee, however, for the comparable subcommittee in the Senate has already deleted the money.

Less successful was the Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, which had its proposed funding increase of \$75 million cut back by \$10 million.

R. Jeffrey Smith

POINT OF VIEW

Quantity a Key to Military Strength

Ruth M. Davis, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Advanced Technology, in an address at Eglin Air Force Base, noted that relative United States-Soviet strength is being measured more and more in each side's ability to produce quantities of things, as well as goods of high quality. She urged that U.S. manufacturing know-how be brought to bear in finding ways of producing strategic goods quickly, efficiently, and in quantity.

You will note that I have listed quantity as well as quality as an essential measure of military technological superiority. I believe we have, in the past, perhaps placed too much emphasis on the superior quality of our technology as a counter to any competitor's edge in quantity—especially as we compare the Soviet's military strength relative to ours. Such a reliance on quality, if continued, could leave us in an untenable vulnerable position.

Fortunately we have recently been factoring quantity into our comparative equations of military strength in a more realistic balance with quality. Indeed, it is worth remembering that it was Lenin, many years ago, who wrote that "... Quantity has a quality all its own. ..."

... To continue to afford adequate national defense in the sense of affording needed quantities of equipment, we are dependent upon decreasing comparative costs, decreasing product delivery cycle times, high quality products and easily maintainable products. It is only through advances in manufacturing technology, electronics, materials technology, and the technologies of quality control, among others, that our manufacturing and service industries can hope to satisfy our many high priority national goals and meet customers' demands.

thused about their work without having some invisible bureaucracy cutting the props on us."

In addition, there was opposition to the plan within the institutes themselves, partly because Klerman had not consulted with institute administrators prior to sending the proposal to Califano. On 10 March, Ernest Noble wrote a memo to Klerman in which he said, in part, "I am perplexed that I was not afforded the opportunity to provide you with this information [about the conflict with legislation] prior to the communication of your plan to the Secretary." Like Klerman's original memo, this missive was soon leaked. There were some reports that Klerman suspected it was NIAAA that had made the documents public, but in an interview with *Science*, Klerman said he had no idea who made them public. He said, however, that "there is no question that some of the NIAAA staff sought to encourage opposition" to the proposal, and that Noble had made his own feelings clear. Noble supported a centralization of peer review within each institute.

Noble has denied that he tried to inflame the opposition, claiming as others that no such attempt was necessary. "I knew the power of the constituency all

along," he told *Science*. Robert DuPont, director of NIDA, said that "Gerry [Klerman] walked into a minefield on this one. He didn't realize the historical independence of the institutes because neither he nor the Secretary [Califano] was around at the time everything was set up. I told him that the costs were not worth the effort, and other people did too. But he's his own man, very strong-willed, and has to do it his own way."

Ultimately, Klerman's proposal was not successful. In the face of mounting pressure, Klerman and Califano requested a meeting with Senator Williams on the evening of 25 April. At the meeting, Califano told Williams that the peer review centralization would occur within each institute, a compromise that has proved acceptable to all groups involved. On the following morning, Ernest Noble was requested to step aside. Klerman told *Science* that the firing had no relation to the defeat of his original proposal, although a number of officials in the three institutes have stated that it did. He also refused to confirm or deny reports that the orders for Noble's replacement came from Califano, saying instead that "it was a collaborative effort."

All of this now leaves the ADAMHA

institutes with two acting directors but with a peer review program that Klerman believes "will really strengthen the quality of science here." Several NIAAA staff members noted that the changes were largely welcomed. "The program directors here have pet concepts and projects, and they have attempted to influence the peer review process," said one staff member. "We make presentations before the reviewers on projects that we supervise and try to get them passed in place of the alternatives. More attention needs to be paid to technical competence."

NIDA Under Investigation

Many researchers believe the same condition exists at NIDA, which is currently under investigation by the Inspector General of HEW for a series of possible abuse of grants and contracts. DuPont is expected to stay on as the agency's director until sometime after the inspector's report is issued later this month. Informed sources have indicated that the report will absolve DuPont from responsibility for the abuses, but will be critical of a number of NIDA employees whose relatives apparently received NIDA funding. A draft of the report is currently being reviewed by the HEW general counsel for possible referral to the Justice Department.

A lingering issue in these dismissals may be the capability of the Administration to circumvent rules for removing officials from government posts. Bertram Brown, who is a regular officer in the Public Health Service and therefore could only be reassigned after his firing, was appointed guest scholar at the Smithsonian Woodrow Wilson Center. Noble, who was a GS-18 in the civil service, has been attached to the NIDA office of public affairs since his firing. Recently, he requested a clarification of his job status from Klerman, and learned that he had been not "reassigned" but "detailed" to work on special projects—a job action that does not require formal advance notification and justification.

Although Noble is not pleased with recent events, he has no intention of challenging the action before the civil service commission, and would like to return to his former position at the University of California in Irvine. Nor does the NIAAA constituency seem likely to raise a howl—its interest was in the peer review issue, and that has been favorably settled; Noble seems only to have been the fall guy. Though a replacement for Noble may eventually have been appointed anyway, 'twas politics that hastened his demise.—R. JEFFREY SMITH