

though the job is supposedly an apolitical appointment. The firing raised eyebrows particularly because Robbins' commission in the public health service was revoked. National Institutes of Health director Donald Fredrickson offered to take Robbins on board the agency, but Schweiker turned down the proposal. Robbins is still looking for a job.

Schweiker wrote back to the chairman of the subcommittee on oversight and investigation, John Dingell (D-Mich.), citing line and verse that he said gave him the authority to dismiss Robbins. The commissioned corps personnel manual states in subchapter CC43.7, section C-1, that reserve officers serve a 3-year probationary period. During that time, the officer may be dismissed "without cause." Robbins was hired in late 1980 as a reserve officer.

A subcommittee staff aide says that the rule appears clear-cut but adds that the panel will research Schweiker's decision a bit more before it decides to drop the matter.

—**Marjorie Sun**

Afghan Casualties: Ancient Artworks

While diplomats ponder a political solution to the war in Afghanistan, experts in ancient Afghan art have had their own worries. Afghan and American archeologists fear that many works from the principal museums have been damaged or plundered. Rumors of destruction and theft have stirred the archeology community so much that the State Department queried the U.S. embassy in Kabul. One expert says, however, that some rumors are propaganda.

Officials there replied that some pieces from the Kabul Museum were destroyed when the collection, including delicate glass and ivory from the first and second century, had to be packed up and moved out so the museum could be used as an army mess hall. They were unable to determine if a museum in Herat, which has an exhibit of brilliantly tiled 15th-century monuments, was damaged. Archeologists were also concerned that two giant monuments of Buddha in Bamiyan Valley were damaged during



Afghanistan: Tourist Organization

Giant Buddha in Bamiyan Valley

Pictured in undated photo

heavy fighting there, but the State Department says that at least one of them was intact a year ago.

No one has been able to examine the museums or monuments firsthand because travel in Afghanistan is very restricted. The former director of the Afghan Institute of Archaeology, Schaibai Mustamandy, says that before he fled Afghanistan, "Lots of objects were destroyed. I don't know what has happened to the rest of them." He escaped from his country a week before the invasion and now lives in Falls Church, Virginia.

Nancy Dupree, co-author of the official guidebook to the Kabul Museum, says that nothing is missing from that museum based on reports she's received from friends still there. The rumors of destruction are drummed up to discredit the new regime and the Soviets, she says.

William Trousdale, curator and director of anthropology at the National Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian, says objects he excavated and kept at the Institute in Kabul are now gone. He says that one of the most precious pieces of the Kabul museum—a second-century glass vessel with an etching of Pharos of Alexandria—was broken during the museum move. —**Marjorie Sun**

Congressional Confusion over "Conception"

Senator Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) defines "conception" as the fertilization of the egg by the sperm. Representative Henry Hyde (R-Ill.) defines it as the implantation of the embryo, which takes place roughly 5 days after fertilization. This may not seem like a big issue. But it could be because of an identical bill that these legislators are sponsoring in Congress.

The bill, which is an attempt to make an end run around the 1973 Supreme Court decision that struck down state laws prohibiting abortion, states: "The Congress finds that present-day scientific evidence indicates significant likelihood that actual human life exists from conception." The measure, if enacted and if deemed constitutional—the latter *if* is apparently the bigger of the two—would permit the states to enact laws that prohibit abortion. It would also make it harder to challenge those laws by prohibiting federal district and appeals courts from hearing the cases.

The problem with defining conception as fertilization, à la Helms, is that it might mean that intrauterine devices and the "morning-after pill," which probably act by preventing implantation, could end up banned in states that enact antiabortion laws based on the bill.

Hyde, at least, is against that. He has been quoted in *Newsweek* as saying, "a bill outlawing the Pill and IUD will not pass, period. And I for one don't intend to try." A spokeswoman for the representative says that she does not know whether he is aware that he and Helms define conception differently. Hearings on the bill are to be held on 23 and 24 April, and any differences may be ironed out at that time. "The wording of the bill may have to be altered," she concluded.

As for the scientific meaning of the word conception, three medical dictionaries unequivocally define it as fertilization. But a fourth, the 23rd edition of *Stedman's Medical Dictionary*, calls it implantation just as unequivocally. If Congress wants to avoid misunderstandings as it attempts to legislate when human life begins, it will have to use a more specific word—but not conception. —**Jean L. Marx**