Science Policy Wordsmith Responds to Bell

Many of the major science policy pronouncements of the last 20 years have come from the typewriter of Stanley D. Schneider. If the name is not immediately familiar it is because of the very qualities that have kept him employed as speech writer and aide consecutively to an Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) chairman, National Science Foundation (NSF) director, and three presidential science advisers. His long innings are in part the payoff for a passion for anonymity. Now Schneider is moving on to practice his trade as director of executive speeches at Bell Laboratories.

A writer with credits in radio, television, and films, Schneider came to Washington in the late 1950's to work on an Army medical education television project. After other jobs in and out of government he went to work for AEC chairman Glenn T. Seaborg in 1964 as speech writer and public affairs assistant. Seaborg, a Nobel Prize winner and quondam academic, was a tireless traveler in behalf of his agency and took special pride in his public prose. Schneider was kept very busy making sure that the speeches were polished and pithy. He says it was the most eventful period of his Washington service. He often went on the road with Seaborg and, since it was the era of the "environmentalist upsurge," Schneider recalls, "we got run out of town a few times."

After Seaborg left government Schneider in 1972 shifted to NSF, writing mainly for director H. Guyford Stever. It was a time when, at President Nixon's behest, the NSF director also served as President's science adviser. When the science adviser was restored to the White House under President Ford, Schneider went along, became a regular at the Office of Science and Technology Policy, and served as wordsmith and public affairs aide to Stever, Frank Press, and, for the last year, to George A. Keyworth. Schneider attributes his departure to a desire to try something new, in this case the private sector, after 25 years of federal service.

Without claiming any undue behind-the-scenes influence Schneider admits that one of the pleasures of the job was the possibility of "infiltrating your ideas. You might be able to inject something, sometime into the system." One thing he learned is that although policies are often announced in speeches, it sometimes works the other way around. Schneider says that not infrequently his bosses said something in a speech that then became policy.—***John Walsh***

House Committees Choke on Small Business Bills

Legislation that would channel a fixed portion of the federal government's R & D funds to small business has run into some roadblocks in the House of Representatives after speeding virtually unimpeded through the Senate. Several House committees have proposed amendments that would severely limit the legislation's scope and impact.

The measure, which has drawn heavy fire from university lobbyists because it would divert some funds from basic research at a time when budgets are under severe pressure, had seemed unstoppable (*Science*, 27 November 1981, p. 1003). A bill, sponsored by Senator Warren Rudman (R–N.H.), swept through the Senate last December by a vote of 90 to 0, and a similar version was approved unanimously by the House Committee on Small Business. Both bills would require federal agencies that support at least $100 million worth of research each year to set aside a fraction of their R & D funds—1 percent under the Senate bill, 3 percent under the House version—for programs to spur innovation by small businesses.

The chief objection that has been raised to the bills is that the "set-aside" would be mandatory and it would be taken out of existing programs. The House Committee on Science and Technology has approved an amendment, however, that would require agencies to establish small business innovation programs but their funding would be determined by the usual appropriations process rather than by a fixed set-aside. The amendment squeaked through the committee by the narrowest of margins, however; a move to retain the set-aside approach failed by a vote of 16 to 17.

Other House committees took a simpler approach. The Committee on Armed Services voted on 10 March to exempt the Defense Department and the weapons programs of the Department of Energy entirely from the bill, and the Committee on Energy and Commerce voted last month to exempt the National Institutes of Health.

These amendments will be proposed when the bill reaches the House floor, perhaps early in April. Lobbyists for small businesses are campaigning hard for the version approved by the House small business committee, however, and the outcome at this stage is difficult to predict. And even if any of the amendments do prevail in the House, there is no telling what will happen when the bills go to a House-Senate conference committee.—***Colin Norman***

Researchers Predict Fewer NIH Grants

The number of competing grants funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for fiscal year (FY) 1983 could drop as low as 3000, rather than the 4100 proposed by the Reagan Administration, according to a group of leading biomedical researchers. In any event, the number of grants would fall far short of a goal set 2 years ago of 5000 "stabilization" grants. The new estimate was discussed at a recent hearing held by Representative Henry Waxman (D–Calif.).

The Delegation for Basic Biomedical Research, whose members include three Nobel laureates and former NIH director Donald Fredrickson, has challenged the Administration's assumptions in its calculations. According to the FY 1983 budget, NIH will fund 4100 grants partly as a result of savings from a 10 percent cut in indirect cost reimbursement to institutions. NIH is also proposing to cut noncompeting grants by 4 percent and transfer the savings to competing grants. But the delegation's budget analyst, Federico Welsch, predicts that Congress may veto these spending reductions.

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Welsch calculates that the figure may drop as low as 3000 based on the following computation: He estimates that the 10 percent cut in indirect costs is equal to $70 million and that the 4 percent cut is equal to $67 million. The two reductions total $137 million. This figure, divided by the average cost of an NIH grant—$124,000—is equal to 1100. Finally, subtract 1100 from 4100 to get 3000 grants.

The delegation's estimate probably represents a rock-bottom figure. Congress, however, may be inclined to pass the cut in noncompeting grants, a reduction imposed during the FY 1982 continuing resolution. At a recent meeting at NIH, Assistant Secretary of Health Edward Brandt said that cuts in indirect costs are "still negotiable."—***Marjorie Sun***

Preventive Research Office Suggested

Secretary of Health and Human Services Richard S. Schweiker might establish a top-level division that conducts applied research in disease prevention, according to a department official.

Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation Robert J. Rubin recently told the National Institutes of Health (NIH) director's advisory board that "prevention research is a legitimate enterprise" and that the federal government "wants the maximum return on past investments" in biomedical research. Rubin said Schweiker favors setting up an Office of Preventive Health Applications of Research.

The plan would provide a visible way for Schweiker to live up to a statement made at his confirmation hearings nearly a year ago that he would like "to be remembered as putting preventive health care and preventive medicine at the top of the list of priorities."

But at least two participants at the NIH board meeting said the proposed office was a bad idea, partly because funds from the NIH budget probably would be diverted to this new division. Basic research, they argued, is the true basis of preventive medicine.

—Marjorie Sun

Alaska Stakes a Claim for Arctic Research

A modest expansion of arctic research is under way in the state of Alaska, thanks to an unusual initiative by the state government. This expansion could soon be augmented by the federal government through an Arctic Research and Policy Act recently introduced in the U.S. Senate, with Alaska the obvious beneficiary. These initiatives are intended to mitigate a problem of uncoordinated and underfunded research in a state with massive natural resources.

Last year the state, through a grant award system modeled generally on that used by the National Science Foundation, furnished $2 million in grants for basic and applied research and disbursed $280,000 for small technology projects. The grants were administered by the state Council on Science and Technology, which was established in 1978 to provide science advice and assistance to the governor and state legislature and later given an expanded role.

According to the council's executive director Christopher Noah, the legislature expects the council to fund "good research relevant to issues in the state." Most of the projects seem to focus on peculiarly Alaskan problems. For example, one study of the biochemistry of arsenic in mine drainage, a particular problem of gold mines, has applications in many places in Alaska where mine runoff contaminates drinking water. The council also supports some social and behavioral research, such as a study of the potential effect of oil development on native life-styles. The council is aiding efforts to promote the federal bill by funding meetings and planning activities.

The Arctic Research bill (S.1562) was introduced on 31 July by Senator Frank H. Murkowski (R–Alaska) in behalf of himself and senators Ted Stevens (R–Alaska) and Henry Jackson (D–Wash.). The sponsors argue that more and better coordinated arctic research is necessary in view of Alaska's importance to the economy because of its energy resources and to national security because of its propinquity to the Soviet Union.

Gerry Atwell/USFWS

A high-level arctic research council would be established with the secretaries of Interior, Defense, and Commerce, the governor of Alaska, and federal science agency chiefs as members. The council would be charged with formulating and coordinating a comprehensive arctic research policy. The bill would provide considerable financial leverage by creating an Arctic Research Fund that would have the right to 1 percent of revenues up to $25 million a year from government sales or leases on the North Slope or its continental shelf. The bill introduced last summer has made no legislative headway so far but its sponsors say they expect hearings soon.

As to future prospects for state support of research, Alaska's Council on Science and Technology shares with all other operations of state government a heavy dependence on oil revenues. And oil revenues are down because of the drop in demand and prices. Hearings on the council's budget are now in progress before the state legislature and the coming weeks will test how well the R & D experiment will survive in a cold climate.—***John Walsh***