

Congress Reprieves a Lab

Until last March, the Gorgas Memorial Institute of Tropical and Preventive Medicine could scarcely have been considered a hot political item. Then the National Institutes of Health (NIH) proposed cutting its share of the Gorgas Institute's budget to zero, a move that would effectively have led to the organization's demise. The resulting furor has prompted Congress to come to its rescue: the NIH appropriations bill, approved by a conference committee on 18 October, has restored the institute's budget.

The institute, which was established in 1921, has a distinguished record of research on tropical diseases and has some powerful supporters in the biomedical research community. Named after General William Crawford Gorgas, a physician whose work led to the control of yellow fever and malaria—which in turn made possible the construction of the Panama Canal—the institute operates a laboratory in Panama and receives about 80 percent of its funds from NIH. Several prominent scientists led the public outcry when NIH slashed its budget. The State Department also quietly protested the institute's proposed closure on the grounds that it could damage relations with Panama.

NIH was well aware that its move would prompt such a reaction. Indeed, NIH officials were counting on it. The proposed elimination of funding for the Gorgas Institute was one of a series of cuts NIH made in order to reallocate funds into the support of competitive grants. The reprogramming



Gorgas Memorial Laboratory

Would-be victim of the NIH budget reallocations.

was needed to fulfill a pledge made by the Carter Administration—and recently renewed by the Reagan Administration—to fund at least 5000 new grants each year. Since NIH's original budget request would fund only about 3700 such grants, NIH officials were forced to divert some \$140 million from other areas. More than one-third of this proposed reallocation was scheduled to come from support for a variety of research centers, including the Gorgas Institute. The research centers tend to have strong political support, and by targeting them, NIH drew attention to the strains caused by trying to fund 5000 new grants in a tight budget.

Congress has responded by raising NIH's overall budget and it has specifically restored funds for many of the centers. The Gorgas Institute in particular was appropriated \$1.899 million, thanks in part to favorable reports by the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) and the General Accounting Office (GAO).^{*} Both reports were requested by the Senate Appropriations Committee.

OTA looked through the institute's publications, conducted a survey of U.S. scientists familiar with its work, and concluded that its scientific research is highly regarded. It also noted that much of the work is relevant to health problems faced, for example, by U.S. military personnel, and pointed out that NIH would have to do some of the research itself if the Gorgas Institute closed its doors. GAO reached similar conclusions.

Thus, the Gorgas Institute has emerged relatively unscathed from a skirmish that was something of a sideshow in a broader battle over the size and structure of NIH's budget.—COLIN NORMAN

^{*}*Quality and Relevance of Research and Related Activities at the Gorgas Memorial Laboratory* (OTA, Washington, D.C., 1983); *Issues Affecting Continuation of United States Funding of the Gorgas Memorial Institute* (GAO, Washington, D.C., 1983).

ers who believe their institutions are taking overhead at the expense of money for basic science (*Science*, 2 September, p. 929).

For the past several years, indirect costs have consumed an ever-greater fraction of the money NIH has to spend on grants, accounting for 30 percent of the total in FY 1982. University administrators, backed by members of Congress, have vigorously and successfully defended their claim to indirect costs based on OMB's present formula for payment. Although no formal decision has been announced, it is anticipated that a government-wide review of indirect cost formulas will be undertaken shortly by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

The new appropriations bill contains a few items of note but does not constitute a detailed blueprint for NIH such as that contained in another pending NIH bill sponsored by Representative Henry A. Waxman (D-Calif.) which would direct the institutes to initiate a number of new programs in response to pressures from special interest health groups (*Science*, 19 August, p. 726). For instance, the appropriations bill provides that \$10 million be set aside in the budget of the National Institute of Neurological and Communicative Disorders and Stroke for special awards in neurosciences research in honor of former Senator Jacob Javits who is dying of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or Lou Gehrig's disease. And even though an earmarked \$30 million for Alzheimer's disease was struck from the bill as a separate item in conference, enough money is included in the budget for the National Institute on Aging to support that level of Alzheimer's research.

The new bill also contains money for AIDS research (\$29 million) and funds for NIH's relatively recent instrument-sharing program in which two or more investigators can apply for money to purchase expensive equipment, such as a cell sorter or electron microscope, to be used on a shared basis.

The one important item left out of the appropriations bill is training which is currently supported by a continuing resolution and may be next year as well if new authorizing legislation is not passed soon. However, NIH officials say that a continuing resolution would enable them to support some 10,000 trainees next year—about the same number as in FY 1983—which is 900 more than the President's budget would have funded.

All in all, as one of NIH's budget officers said, "It is another good year for NIH."—BARBARA J. CULLITON