

Over a (Pork) Barrel: The Senate Rejects Peer Review

The Defense Department balked at some less-than-explicit orders on where to spend \$65 million in research funds; Congress has made the orders explicit, defeating peer review

ON 26 June, Congress made clear its position—not for the first time—on how it intends to select universities to receive large research grants. With a resolute vote in the Senate (56 to 42), it decided to rely on its own political wisdom, also known as the pork barrel, and not on peer review.

Thus ends a moment of vacillation. Congress nearly succumbed to the view of a few senators led by John Danforth (R-MO) who said it might make sense to let the experts themselves choose the most qualified recipients. Danforth's amendment to this effect lost decisively on 26 June, ending a debate that began 6 months earlier.

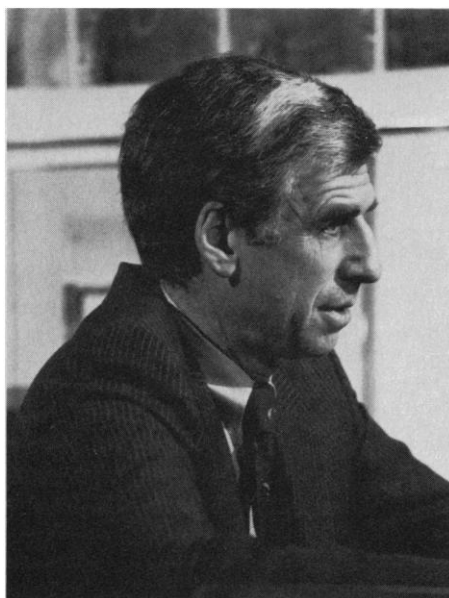
Late last year, Congress directed the Department of Defense to spend \$65.6 million of its research funds at ten specific universities. The directive, which was written into a committee report on a catch-all spending bill, was the latest, and so far the most blatant, example of academic pork barrel politics—the growing practice of funding university projects on the basis of congressional directives. The move drew a chorus of protestations from scientific and academic groups, but the bill was signed into law and it looked like a fait accompli (*Science*, 17 January, p. 211).

The Department of Defense (DOD) balked at spending the money, however, and the scientific establishment seized its chance to make a stand. The result has been a political battle that in the past few weeks has seen most of the projects killed off in the Senate, resurrected by a House-Senate conference committee, and finally resuscitated by votes in both chambers.

At this point, the projects appear to be very much alive, and the President is expected to sign the bill that funds them. But even while their fate was being decided, it became clear that this battle was not going to be the last word on pork barrel funding of academic projects. On 19 June, the House Appropriations Committee approved a bill directing the Department of Energy to spend some \$40 million on a half-dozen new uni-

versity projects and a further \$16.5 million on three projects it had funded in previous years but wished to stop bankrolling.

The legislative odyssey of the projects to be funded by DOD indicates that the practice of channeling funds to specific universities clearly has a lot of political support, and Congress is unlikely to cease and desist.



Senator Danforth: Time to draw the line on "political logrolling."

The battle began in earnest last December when Congress approved funding for a variety of agencies under a so-called continuing resolution. The conference report accompanying the final version of the legislation directed DOD to fund projects totaling \$65.6 million at ten universities.* Proposals for most of the projects had never been

submitted to DOD, and many of them had not even been approved by the relevant congressional committees.

Because the directive was contained in a committee report rather than in the legislation itself, it lacked the force of law. Nevertheless, it is rare for an agency to go against a committee's instructions. In this case, however, DOD demurred and has so far declined to spend the money.

Congressional supporters of the projects decided to force DOD to loosen the purse-strings. The House Appropriations Committee added into the actual language of an urgent supplemental appropriations bill a requirement that DOD fund two of the projects—\$11.1 million "for microelectronic engineering and imaging sciences and related purposes" at Rochester Institute of Technology and \$13.5 million "for engineering research and related purposes" at Northeastern University. The latter project is said to have the personal support of House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill (D-MA). The bill was approved by the House on 8 May.

The Senate Appropriations Committee went one step further. Its version of the supplemental appropriations bill contained funds for nine of the original ten projects. The one project not included was a \$10-million grant to Cornell University for a supercomputer and related research. It was left out because Cornell President Frank Rhodes has said the university could not accept the funds unless they were awarded by a competitive process. However, Cornell has a proposal pending for just such a project, and it is likely to get the funds anyway.

The Senate committee, in a bow to the critics, promised in its report on the bill that this would be the last time it would bypass the usual review procedures. "The Committee will not consider any future requests to earmark DOD research and development funds for specific research projects that have not gone through competitive, merit review processes without specific authorization," it

*The ten universities were: Wichita State University, \$5 million; University of Nevada at Las Vegas, \$3.5 million; University of Kansas, \$2 million; Iowa State University, \$6.5 million; Northeastern University, \$13.5 million; Oregon Graduate Center, \$1 million; Oklahoma State University, \$1 million; Cornell University, \$10 million; Rochester Institute of Technology, \$11.1 million; Syracuse University, \$12 million.

"When Did We Agree That Peers Would Cut the Melon?"

It was getting on toward midnight on 5 June when Senator John Danforth (R-MO) began the debate on an amendment to remove some academic pork barrel projects from the urgent supplemental appropriations bill. The lateness of the hour may be one reason why the ensuing 90 minutes of discussion was at times rancorous and at times bizarre. Another reason is that the amendment brought forth an outpouring of frustration from senators whose universities do not generally fare well in the distribution of federal research funds.

Danforth's amendment, which was backed by 21 cosponsors of various political stripes, sought to delete funding for ten specific university projects that the Appropriations Committee had directed the Department of Defense to bankroll. The issue, Danforth opined, is whether scientific projects should be funded on their merits after scientific peer review, or "whether research dollars should be spent by the Appropriations Committee frankly on the basis of political logrolling." In 1982, he said, Congress earmarked \$3 million for specific universities; last year, the figure was \$137.6 million.

Next came Senator Ted Stevens (D-AK), the chairman of the appropriations subcommittee that approved the funds. Stevens argued that "the peer review universities are selected from those outstanding in certain research and they are inclined to give money to the same institutions." He then concocted a novel interpretation of the committee's action: It had crafted a "balanced program," he said, because it approved \$75 million for a new DOD-Universities' Research Initiative, which includes research funds to be distributed according to peer review, and \$80 million for the ten "nonpeer review universities." Stevens then turned Danforth's argument around: He read a list of 37 universities that received special appropriations last year alone, and concluded there is nothing novel about it.

Senators Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) and James Sasser (D-TN) took up Danforth's complaint that the quality of U.S. basic research will be threatened if the practice of earmarking research funds gets out of hand. "We are risking the prospect that our scientists and engineers will become increasingly cynical and disillusioned with the logrolling process that does not consider academic excellence as its principal criterion in the allocation of funds," said Bingaman.

At this point, Senator Russell Long (D-LA) appeared puzzled. "I am sort of in the dark in this matter," he said. "When did we agree that the peers would cut the melon or decide who would get this money?" When Danforth pointed out that Congress included language in the 1984 Deficit Reduction Act to the effect that government grants should be awarded competitively and that peer review constitutes an appropriate procedure for basic research, Long said, "Am I to understand that . . . Congress said we are not going to have any say about who gets this money: are we going to have some peers decide who gets this money?" He seemed incredulous.

Senator Dennis DeConcini (D-AZ), who was defending a \$25-million grant for a project at Arizona State, raised the issue of fairness. Noting that over half of all federal research funds go to just 16 universities, he said, "One look at the universities that received the money shows beyond a shadow of a doubt that unless your university is on the East or West Coast, you are picking up the crumbs of any federal research dollars."

Next came Senator Lowell Weicker (R-CT), chairman of an appropriations subcommittee that deals with health programs. Weicker said he was well aware of the merits of the peer review system, but if individual senators cannot "make a case for circumstances within their state, then there is not much point in having an appropriations committee or indeed to act as a U.S. Senator." Weicker said that, because the overall budget is weighted so heavily toward military spending, "nothing delights me more" than when individual senators take an interest in a university or a cancer center.

After the debate went on a further half-hour, Weicker proposed a motion to table Danforth's amendment before it came to a vote—a move designed to kill the measure. Weicker's motion was defeated by a vote of 58 to 40, however, and Danforth's amendment was subsequently approved by voice vote at about 1 a.m. ■ C. N.

said. The promise proved to be short lived, however. On the very next page of the report, the committee instructed DOD to provide \$25 million to Arizona State University to establish a Center for Science and Engineering Technologies. This brought the total earmarked funds in the Senate bill to \$80.6 million.

The scientific establishment began to mount a counter attack, led by the Association of American Universities (AAU). The stage was set for a full-fledged debate on the Senate floor on 5 June.

Senate supporters of the projects painted the dispute as a contest between the haves and the have-nots (see box). They argued that the peer-review process is inherently unfair since most federal research dollars go to universities that already have more than their share. Nevertheless, after more than 1½ hours of at times rancorous discussion, Danforth's "pro peer review" amendment was approved. The projects were struck from the bill.

The next day, however, Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole (R-KS) made a shrewd move. Dole, whose interest in the matter has a lot to do with the fact that funds for two Kansas universities—\$5 million for Wichita State and \$1 million for the University of Kansas—were torpedoed by Danforth's amendment, proposed an amendment to delete funds for the Rochester and Northeastern projects that had been approved by the House. Since O'Neill wanted the Northeastern project, removing those funds might provide some room for political maneuvering in the conference committee when the House and Senate versions of the bill were reconciled.

It did. The conference committee proposed an amendment to the bill that would provide funds for all nine of the original projects. The money for Arizona State was not included.

The projects were not yet home free, however. The proposed amendment had to be approved separately by the House and Senate when they passed the final conference report on the bill. The House did so with little discussion on 24 June. The ball was then back in the Senate's court; in effect, it was being asked to repeal the Danforth amendment that it had passed just 3 weeks earlier. That is just what it did in the unequivocal vote on 26 June.

What does this imply for the future? Robert Rosenzweig, president of the AAU says, "If you're an optimist, it means Congress now recognizes that universities have a real facilities problem. If you are a pessimist, it means, Katie-bar-the-door. Anything goes." ■

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