The NIH Legislators

The President taketh; Congress giveth back; a handful of congressmen exercise tremendous power over NIH, creating, authorizing, funding, and even directing research at the institutes

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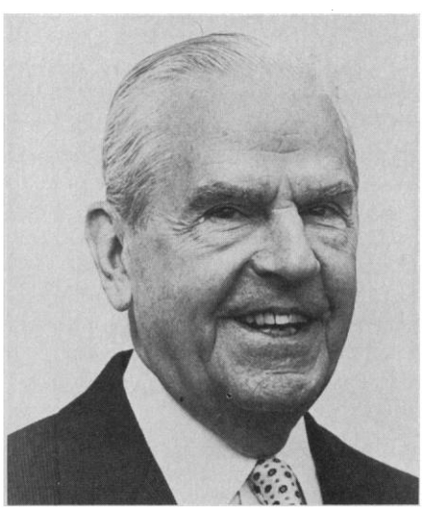
Lowell Weicker *says he's stuck between a know-nothing President and timid Democrats.*

EACH spring, James Wyngaarden, the director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), must present the President's budget request to the House subcommittee responsible for NIH appropriations. And each spring, the congressmen tell Wyngaarden that the Administration's budget is woefully inadequate and completely unacceptable.

This year was no different. In his opening remarks at the appropriations hearing for NIH in March, Representative William Natcher (D–KY), chairman of the House appropriations subcommittee, said: "You know, Dr. Wyngaarden, you heard me say on more than one occasion when I was first elected a member of this committee [in 1954], we had $71 million for the National Institutes of Health, and we are now up to $6.2 billion, and Dr. Wyngaarden, this is the way it should be. If you said to me that next year it would be $10 billion, I would agree that that is the figure we should have, because here is where we should spend our money, on the health of our people and the education of our children."

What followed was a strange day of testimony for Wyngaarden. At one point, Wyngaarden was assured by the subcommittee, "We love you." At another, he was accused by Representative Joseph Early (D–MA) of "fibbing to the American people." Natcher told Wyngaarden he understands the awkward position the NIH director is in, for Wyngaarden must support the President, but he must also have enough funds to run his institutes. So the subcommittee proceeded to applaud the work done by NIH and then rake Wyngaarden over the coals for "defending" the Administration's budget cuts.



William Natcher: *The quintessential Southern gentleman watches over NIH appropriations.*

This spring the President requested $5.6 billion for FY 1988, or $570 million less than what was actually appropriated for NIH in FY 1987. To which Natcher said: "We won't be able to accept that. I can't recommend it to the committee; and if I did, Doctor, they wouldn't accept it, and I don't want to recommend it, and we can't do it."

Wyngaarden, of course, cannot be unhappy to hear Natcher say this. Funds from the appropriation subcommittees are the lifeblood of Wyngaarden's agency. Eventually, Natcher's subcommittee recommended that NIH receive $6.6 billion in FY 1988, plus another $470 million earmarked for AIDS research. The amount is fairly close to the $6.9 billion that Wyngaarden submitted to his overseers at the Public Health Service before his figure was slashed by the Department of Health and Human Services and then whacked by the President's Office of Management and Budget.

And so it goes. The Administration cuts and the appropriations subcommittees restore.

Since 1967, when he was first appointed to the House NIH appropriations subcommittee, Natcher has been a tenacious supporter of biomedical research. Natcher's style during the appropriations hearings is to play the courtly grandfather against his more emotional peer, Representative Silvio Conte (R–MA), ranking minority member, with whom Natcher works closely.

Natcher has a lovely drawl. Labeled "the quintessential Southern gentleman," the 77-year-old Natcher "never raises his voice; never flips out," says one NIH observer. Indeed, directors of the national institutes "probably consider appearing before Natcher's subcommittee something of a high-point. They get half a day to talk about what they're doing and to give a kind of broad brush review before a committee that understands what they're talking about."

Natcher is also something of an anomaly on Capitol Hill. In the age of PACs and $1000-a-plate suppers, Natcher accepts no political contributions of any kind. "He goes his own way" says one lobbyist with a stake in biomedical legislation. "You get the feeling the man hasn't sold himself out." Natcher is known to be cagey around lobbyists, promising them nothing specific, only that his committee will produce "a good bill." Natcher also gets high marks for attendance. He is compulsive about it. Recently he set a House record by casting his 15,000th roll-call vote.

On the other side of Capitol Hill, Natcher's counterpart is Senator Lawton Chiles (D–FL), chairman of the Senate subcommittee for NIH appropriations. This is Chiles's first year as chairman after taking over from Senator Lowell Weicker, Jr. (R–CT), probably the most steadfast supporter of NIH in the Senate and now ranking minority member of the subcommittee. In the past, the combined forces of Democrat Natcher and Republican Weicker made it almost impossible for the White House to stop the steady growth of the NIH budget. How successful Weicker will be as ranking minority member is not yet known.

"My personal view is that Weicker is still going to be a force to be reckoned with," says Bradie Metheny of the Delegation for Basic Biomedical Research, a lobbying group with a number of Nobel laureates among its ranks. "Weicker knows more about NIH and biomedical science than just about anybody in Congress. And knowledge is power."

That power is already being tested. Chiles and Weicker wrestled this month over how

much money their subcommittee would request from the Senate appropriations committee. Traditionally, each of the subcommittees shoots high, hoping that when the inevitable compromises come, they retain most of what they asked for. This year, however, Chiles did not play the game that way.

Weicker says that Chiles was under pressure from Senator John Stennis (D–MS), chairman of the Senate appropriations committee, to keep funding requests down. Weicker says he is finding himself somewhat out of fashion.

Weicker pointedly observes: "On one side you have the know-nothingness about science of the Reagan Administration, and on the other you have Democrats who don't want to raise taxes and who're afraid to cut defense, so they're looking to save money in science, health, and education."

Though the Senate subcommittee will not produce an appropriations bill until this autumn, according to Weicker the Senate's NIH budget for FY 1988 will be much the same as FY 1987. And with a large chunk dedicated to AIDS research, that could mean cuts in other areas and "a very barebones budget" for NIH.

Weicker's basic approach toward NIH has been to fund the institutes and then let the directors decide how to spend the cash. "The scientific community has enough integrity that they don't need a lot of lay politicians telling them what to do," Weicker says. "Science suffers under supervision the same way the arts do. When the government gets too involved, creativity dwindles."

In the past, Weicker has said that "nothing is more important to the nation" than biomedical research. In his own congressional career, science and NIH have been the top priorities. Weicker makes no secret of the fact that he has an 8-year-old son with Down syndrome. At a centennial ceremony at NIH's 300-acre campus in Bethesda, Weicker told a friendly crowd, "nothing reflects priorities as unerringly as the federal budget." Then: "I hope that the celebration will be one of dollars." There was resounding applause (*Science*, 7 November 1986, p. 662).

It is hard to say what kind of applause would go out to Representative Henry Waxman (D–CA). In Congress, there are committees that appropriate funds for NIH and committees that authorize the existence of NIH. Waxman is chairman of the House subcommittee charged with authorizing NIH.

Nobody doubts that Waxman is a strong advocate for biomedical research, but with his support comes a desire for more congressional control over the institutes. During the early 1980s, Waxman fought long and hard to have each of NIH's institutes come up for yearly reauthorization. Presently, Congress is only required to breathe life into the cancer and heart institutes every 3 years, and they are the only 2 of the 12 institutes that require specific reauthorization.

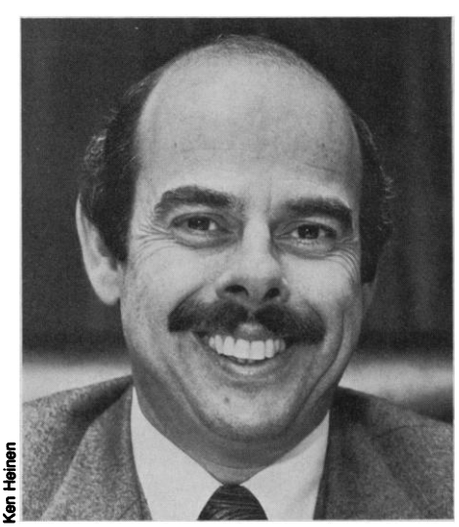
Another disagreement between Waxman and some members of the research community is the representative's penchant for filling his bills with directives to set up committees and to highlight diseases. At various times, he has included language calling for a national commission on orphan diseases, university-based centers to study kidney and digestive diseases, and 25 centers to promote health and disease prevention.

Waxman's critics have charged that he wants to micromanage NIH from Capitol Hill, and that he has a kind of "disease of the month" mentality.

Notes Robert Krauss of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology: "It's a sticky area. There's pressure on Congress from people who have arthritis, people who have these various diseases, and that gives Congress additional resources to tackle the problems, but it can reach a point where research becomes overly political. Most of the solutions to the big questions facing medicine will come from basic research that cuts across lines."

Waxman has explained himself by saying, "We feel that if the taxpayer's dollars . . . are being used for biomedical research, we ought to spell out some of the priorities. We ought to tell NIH what we think they ought to be looking at."

Detractors classify Waxman's actions in the authorization subcommittee as a simple power play. "He was new to the subcommittee and he wanted to make it his," says one lobbyist. Most are more kind. Waxman is bright, tough, straightforward, and on top of emerging health issues. He is particularly active in mounting a legislative response to AIDS. "We don't always agree with Henry, but we respect him," says Richard Godown of the Industrial Biotechnology Association.



Ken Heinen

Henry Waxman: *"We ought to tell NIH what we think they ought to be looking at."*

Because both NIH and the biomedical research community want so badly for Congress to stay out of the day-to-day decision-making, "everybody's ready to fight the Waxman subcommittee even when they're right," says Metheny of the basic research delegation.

Congressional staff members say that charges of Waxman micromanagement have been overblown. "It's water under the bridge," says one. "A complete nonissue."

Time will tell. Waxman's authorization subcommittee is scheduled to take another look at NIH in 1988.

In the Senate, the authorization of NIH is performed by the committee on labor and human resources, now chaired by Senator Edward Kennedy (D–MA), with Senator Orrin Hatch (R–UT) as ranking minority member.

To many biomedical researchers, Hatch must seem like a round peg on a board of squares. He is among the most conservative senators. He can be both dogmatic and loud, working to cut off aid to family-planning clinics that make referrals for abortions and ranting about the evils of "secular humanism" in school.

But Hatch is regarded as being supportive of NIH and sensitive to the needs of researchers. Hatch worked hard to produce a compromise bill in the Senate during the long battle over reauthorization of NIH. It took nearly 5 years to come up with one that could win congressional approval (*Science*, 29 November 1985, p. 1021). An earlier bill in 1984 called for new institutes of arthritis and nursing. Reagan vetoed it, citing "objectionable provisions that seriously undermine and threaten the ability of NIH to manage itself." In 1985, the reauthorization still had the arthritis institute, but the controversial nursing institute was dropped, only to become a scaled-down nursing center within NIH. Some of Waxman's more prescriptive directives were also lost in the process. Hatch had done his best to remove what he thought bothered Reagan the most. But the President vetoed the bill again. This time, though, Waxman and Hatch had enough time and support to override the presidential veto.

With Republicans and Democrats joining forces to support and increase funding for biomedical research, the President's dream of cutting the NIH budget seems almost certain to remain just that, a dream. ■

WILLIAM BOOTH