Random Samples:

Panning Pork

How do you like your pork? Perhaps "pure, unadulterated, uncooked, dripping pork in its rawest form"? A majority of U.S. senators decided they didn't like the taste of pork served up in that colorful description by Senator James Exon (D–NE), and voted to skim a little pork fat from the Department of Defense appropriations for fiscal 1989.

During a Senate-House conference on the appropriations bill, conferees sneaked in $46 million in projects earmarked for specific universities. None of the projects were in the President's budget, nor had any been through a merit review process. In accordance with recent tradition, some of the universities were never even mentioned by name. Instead, they appeared under code descriptions such as "a university campus in the District of Columbia, where there will be established an Institute for Intercultural Security Studies." (Read: Georgetown University, which looked for a $10-million down payment on a $60-million new building). Some of the codes are so baffling that Senator Sam Nunn (D–GA), author of the pork-rendering amendment to the appropriations bill, has insisted that the Department of Defense, which was not responsible for including the projects, to list the universities in question by February 1989.

Nunn's amendment, which passed, gets rid of the earmarking for specific universities, but keeps the $46 million for research. The secretary of DOD will have discretion in allocating the funds.

It was a modest, but symbolic, victory for the pork butchers in Congress who are trying to stem the growth of the practice. In fiscal 1982, Congress set aside some $3 million in various appropriations bills for projects at specific universities. By fiscal 1987 the figure had grown to $225 million.

National Science Foundation director Erich Bloch lauded Nunn's effort. "Scientists don't make laws, and legislators shouldn't make scientific or technical decisions," he told an audience at Iowa State a few weeks after the vote.

The final word goes to Senator Dennis DeConcini (D–AZ), who said during the debate that "this old talk about unadulterated, pure pork is enough to make you want to go on a diet." He chose not to take his own advice. He voted to keep the pork in the budget.

A Surprise for Sakharov

When Andrei Sakharov visited the New York Academy of Sciences for a brief reception during his November visit, he probably expected the kind of warm, effusive introductions he got everywhere during his stay. And he got them. Seven of them. The speakers included Academy president William Golden; Joseph Birman of the Committee of Concerned Scientists; Val Fitch of the American Physical Society; Morris Pripstein of Scientists for Sakharov, Orlov and Sharansky; Ross Garon, the 16-year-old president of the New York Academy's junior academy; and Joel Lebowitz of the Academy's Human Rights of Scientists Committee.

He also got a surprise introduction from Sergei Kovalev, the dissident scientist who figured prominently at the Moscow summit last June. Like Sakharov, Kovalev made the trip primarily to attend a meeting in Washington, D.C., of the new International Foundation for the Survival and Development of Humanity. While Sakharov expected to meet up with Kovalev in Washington, he didn't count on Kovalev's racing from the airport to the Academy function. His unanticipated arrival made for what one participant called "a very emotional moment." Sakharov had threatened to resign from the foundation board unless Kovalev and six other human rights advocates were allowed to attend the November meeting. Kovalev plans to remain in the country on a 3-month visa to visit his daughter and son-in-law, and to meet with colleagues at Cornell University.

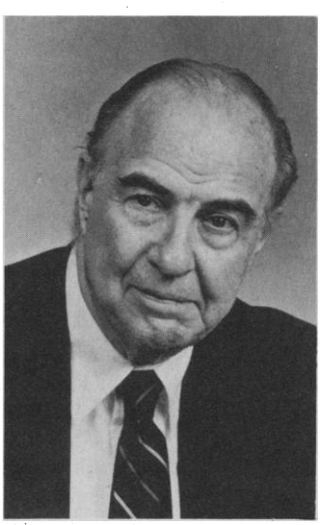
Kovalev was a spokesman for the group of nearly 100 dissidents who met with President Reagan at Spaso House in Moscow last June. Because of his candor, Kovalev, a survivor of 7 years in labor camps and 3 years of internal exile, lost a promised scientific position.

The Soviet contingent to the Washington meeting is thought to be the largest gathering of human rights workers ever allowed out of the country.

From Metrecal to Methadone

One cultural icon of the 1960s is the liquid diet food called Metrecal, now but a distant memory. The product would not have been possible at all without Vincent Dole, a Rockefeller University researcher whose work in the 1950s on nutrition and obesity led to development of the drink.

Dole then turned his attention to drug abuse as a member of a New York City advisory committee. "I could see that the city was experiencing an epidemic of heroin addiction," Dole recalls. "The drug was sold openly on every street corner in some parts of the city, but perhaps because the middle class was not involved, addiction was considered a problem for law enforcement, not for the medical profession."



Vincent Dole

Dole's work changed all that. He began a new program at the Rockefeller University to study heroin addiction as a medical rather than a law enforcement dilemma. In testing various drugs to find an agent to help wean addicts, Dole and his team came across methadone, a synthetic opiate developed by the Germans in World War II as a pain-killer. Carefully titrated doses of methadone, Dole found, would satisfy an addict's craving without giving him the high associated with heroin. Thus, medical management of heroin addiction became possible.

Dole also postulated that methadone blocked sites in the brain where heroin acts. Years before technology existed to study these sites, Dole estimated their number and devised a laboratory protocol for detecting them.

For his efforts, Dole received the 1988 Albert Lasker Clinical Research Award. The award carries a $15,000 prize but, more important, the awards generally are regarded as predictors of Nobel prizes. Since the awards were established in 1944, 46 Lasker winners have gone on to win a Nobel prize.

Two other scientists received Lasker Basic Medical Research awards. Thomas R. Cech of the University of Colorado, Boulder, won for his work showing that RNA can act as an enzyme. Phillip A. Sharp of the MIT Cancer Research Center, won for his work elucidating the mechanism of RNA splicing during gene expression. Senator Lowell Weicker (R–CT), who lost his bid for a fourth term in the November election, received the first Lasker Public Service award.

■ GREGORY BYRNE