

A Clash of Cultures at Meeting on Misconduct

Scientists and congressional staff members argue over how to deal with fraud in science; legislation looms in the background

IF THERE WAS EVER any doubt about how very different the cultures of Capitol Hill and science can be, a meeting last week at Cold Spring Harbor on "the ethos of scientific research" should settle the question: The two groups can be worlds apart. They continue to amaze each other by having the audacity to know what's best.

The closed meeting was an attempt to get representatives of the two warring camps to sit in the same room and discuss what to do about the highly emotional topic of scientific misconduct and fraud. On one side of the aisle were prominent molecular biologists, mostly from the East Coast. On the other side were staff members from the congressional committees that oversee and support the activities of American bioscience. By all accounts, exchanges were feisty and heated. "It was a hats-off, hair-down kind of meeting," Norton Zinder of Rockefeller University told *Science* after the meeting.

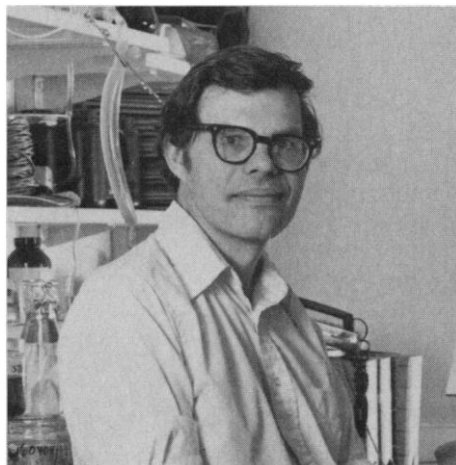
To illustrate: At one point, Walter Stewart, the crusading fraud-buster on loan from the National Institutes of Health to the subcommittee of Representative John Dingell (D-MI), wrote on the blackboard the word: "Holocaust." By this, Stewart meant that the problems of scientific cheating were being ignored by many researchers, who like some Germans dealt with the problem by looking the other way. It was not the best analogy to use before an audience of scientists, where more than a few are Jewish.

"Stewart brings to the problem such a degree of emotion, such an intensity of emotion, that he has no real sense of the extent of the problem or how to deal with it," says Richard Axel of Columbia University. Stewart was challenged by the audience, many of whom have a bitter taste in their mouths over Stewart's role in the "Baltimore case" (*Science*, 1 July 1988, p. 241).

Stewart himself refused to discuss the meeting in an on-the-record interview. In previous testimony before Congress and in other forums, Stewart maintains that fraud is a serious problem that is not being adequately addressed by the scientific community. With his NIH colleague Ned Feder, Stewart reports that the two receive about 100 allegations of misconduct a year, and

the duo believes that this number represents only the tip of a huge iceberg of cheating.

It seems that despite a few notable exceptions, the scientific community does not really understand Congress, and perhaps vice versa. Both tried to explain to the other how they do business. The congressional staffers were surprised at how little the scientists know about the political machinery of Capitol Hill. The scientists say they were surprised at how little the staff knew about the scientific community. "The government people didn't have a good sense of how science works," says Axel. "They couldn't come to grips with the fact that



Walter Stewart. Angered many researchers at the meeting by arguing that the scientific community is underestimating problems of misconduct.

there are no absolute truths . . . that our data reflect closer and closer approximations of what might turn out to be true."

As might be expected, the grinding together of the two cultures produced a few sparks. Depending on one's point of view, the scientists were either "vigorous" or "obnoxious." Or perhaps they were just acting the way that a room full of prominent scientists generally act.

"Scientists are more comfortable yelling at each other. People argue differently in Washington," says Carol Scheman of the Association of American Universities. In the excessively formal floor debates in Congress, for example, an enemy is always referred to

as "the gentleman from North Carolina," or "the senator from Massachusetts." In the heat of an intimate scientific gathering, a colleague may be referred to as "an idiot." Says Scheman: "The wisdom in Washington is don't get mad, get even. In science, you don't get even, you get mad."

Eventually, there did seem to be some understanding at the meeting. The staffers told the scientists that Congress was damn serious about its role as a fiduciary watchdog. They let the scientists know that if the universities and the NIH fail to address allegations of misconduct, then Congress will consider fixing the situation with legislation. Indeed, at the end of the last session of Congress, there was legislation circulating that would have erected something like an office of scientific integrity.

At the beginning of the meeting, the scientists responded with incredulity to the congressional staffers. The suggestion that fraud was a widespread problem in need of legislative remedy seemed to many in the audience to be "outlandish," says David Korn of Stanford University School of Medicine. But as the staffers pressed on, the scientists awoke as if from a deep sleep and began to comprehend how Congress views the problem. Says Korn: "Many of the scientists were unaware of the intensity of the feelings in Congress." Adds Henry Wotkis of Tufts University: "The congressional people made it clear that they wanted to see some movement in this area."

If there were sparks, there was also some agreement. Though most of the scientists contend that there is not an explosion of fraud, they agree there is a problem, perhaps as Walter Gilbert of Harvard University, says: "a small but very real problem." There was general agreement that Congress should not be in the business of scrutinizing scientific papers. Rather, the universities and NIH should do the job. Unfortunately, there was also a consensus that the system is not working well. The million dollar question is whether the scientific community is going to be given more time to set up a system to police itself, or whether Congress will grow weary of promises and act.

To head off legislation, the Association of American Universities recently published a framework for handling allegations of fraud and misconduct at the university level. The Public Health Service also has published a set of proposed guidelines to be followed by institutes that accept grants from NIH and the Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration (*Science*, 14 October 1988, p. 187, and 20 January, p. 305). Whether all this is too little too late remains to be seen. Congress is planning more hearings in the spring. ■ **WILLIAM BOOTH**