Room at the Top

Finding people to fill top posts in the federal science bureaucracy has not been easy for the Bush Administration; a problem for health posts—the abortion litmus test—has eased

WHILE CONGRESS is holding its annual, noisy tug-of-war over the budget for the current fiscal year, another annual budget battle is going on within the White House. Top officials in the federal agencies are vying for priority in the President's 1991 budget blueprint that goes to Congress in January. Success could mean new programs and initiatives, but right now there is a shortage of generals leading the charge for science and technology.

A year after President Bush was elected, a surprising number of key posts in his Administration either lack permanent appointees or have been filled so recently that their occupants are still learning the ropes. William Carey, a veteran of the White House budget office and now a consultant to the Carnegie Corporation in New York, says the problem of filling critical positions is as bad as he's seen it in 40 years in Washington. "To be at this point in a new Administration and still be encountering difficulties in persuading the people you want to come into the system . . . puts the government's ability to do any policy leading in science and technology at an extraordinary disadvantage," he says.

Top science posts that lack confirmed appointees include the director of the National Institutes of Health, the director of defense research and engineering, the undersecretary of Commerce for technology, the head of research at the Department of Energy, and a slew of subordinate positions in a variety of agencies. One notable exception is the National Science Foundation, where virtually every senior post has been filled (see p. 575).*

This personnel shortage has repercussions that extend well beyond next year's budget. Temporary appointees are frequently reluctant to make long-term policy commitments, and some pressing issues involving science and technology are either in danger of being shunted to the back burner or of being resolved without full-time players representing important scientific points of view. These issues include the use of fetal tissue in research, disposal of nuclear waste, international cooperation in major scientific projects, and the future direction of civilian and military technology policy.

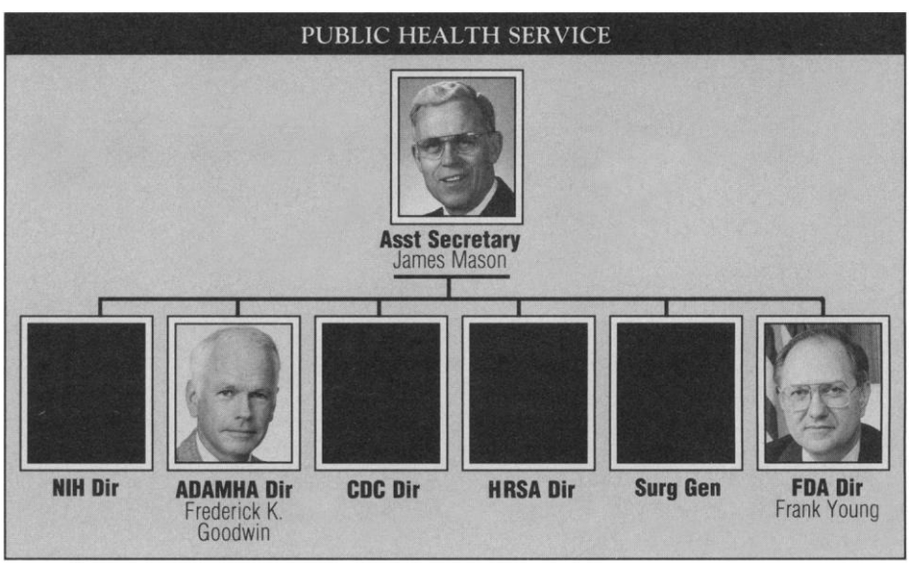
Criticism for the glacial pace of presidential appointments has not been restricted to the science community. According to a study by the House of Representatives Democratic Study Group, only 178 of 397 (44%) presidential appointees were in place and confirmed by 18 September. But Chase Untermeyer, assistant to the President and director of presidential personnel, says the Democrats' picture is out of focus. "This issue has been politicized," he says. "There's no other way of saying it."

Untermeyer contends that by the Administration's count, 62% of the presidentially appointed posts in Cabinet departments are filled, and of the remainder most are either going through White House clearance or awaiting confirmation by the Senate. He says there are only 27 positions for which no candidate has been identified.

Untermeyer says that the Administration has moved fastest where it felt the need was greatest. But he acknowledges that filling science posts poses special problems. "Generally speaking, the science and technology positions have been the hardest to fill because of the difficulty of finding able people who share the President's agenda and are willing to come to Washington to work for the pay and under the conditions which federal government service requires these days," he says.

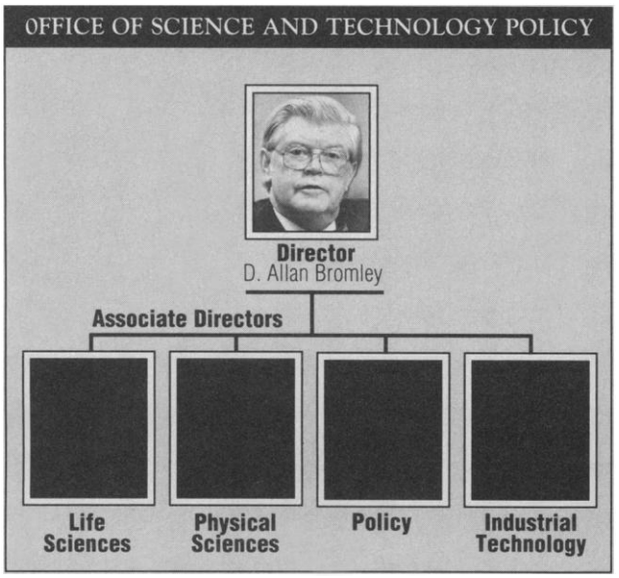
Those conditions, according to Untermeyer, include "hostile committee chairmen, probing press, rambunctious interest groups, wily civil servants, and various other forms of distraction from the main mission. A scientist or a businessman is used to thinking along straight lines. In Washington one reaches goals often through curlicues."

Increased attention to potential conflict of interest has also proved troublesome in some cases. Strict financial reporting requirements and the frequent need to divest assets that give the appearance of a conflict have apparently discouraged many candidates. And several federal officials resigned earlier this year before a new law went into effect that some felt placed unduly restrictive conditions on future employment of federal managers. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration was particularly hard hit by the new rules, losing several of its top administrators this spring (*Science*, 21 July, p. 251).

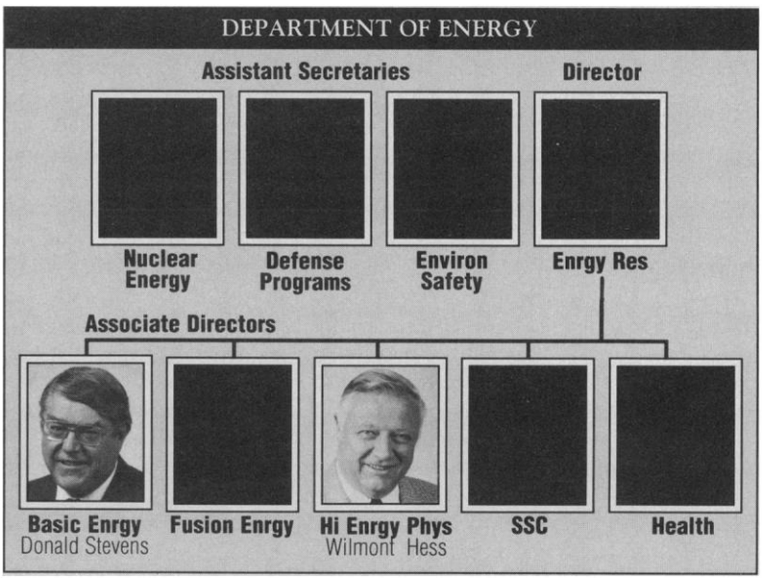


Pictures are provided only for confirmed or permanent appointments. Antonia Novello is the Administration's choice for Surgeon General, but her nomination has not been sent to the Senate for confirmation. The directors of CDC and HRSA are not presidential appointments.

*Not all vacancies await White House action. NSF's assistant directors are chosen by the foundation's director, and the director of the Energy Department's Office of Energy Research chooses his associate directors. But without someone at the top, line appointments are inevitably delayed.



James B. Wyngaarden and J. Thomas Ratchford have been nominated to fill the Life Sciences and Policy positions. The Senate held confirmation hearings for both last week.



The director of the Office of Energy Research is the same level as an assistant secretary. Robert O. Hunter held the job until last week. The associate directors are not presidential appointments.

As Representative Don Ritter, a Republican from Pennsylvania who has been an active player in congressional efforts to set science and technology policy, puts it, "Unless the stakes are extremely high—such as a cabinet position where someone will call you 'Mr. Secretary'—a lot of people who'd like to take a job are just taking themselves out of the running."

Ritter is frustrated by the fact that a President from his own political party hasn't done more to move policy forward. "I'm not sure the level at which science and technology in general is considered in the Administration is high enough."

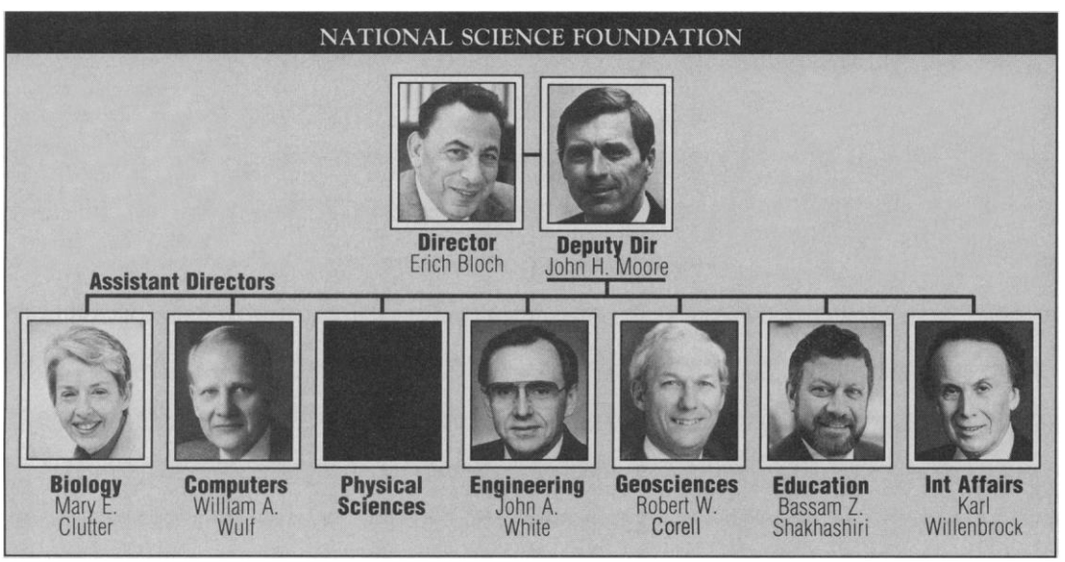
Ritter and several of his congressional colleagues are particularly upset by the Administration's failure to fill key positions in the Department of Commerce that are supposed to oversee new thrusts in civilian technology policy. As part of a major reorganization last year that Congress wrote into the Trade Bill, the Commerce Department created a Technology Administration, headed by an undersecretary, that was intended to coordinate a variety of new government-industry initiatives to develop critical technologies. But as early as last April, it was clear that the new office would go nowhere without a leader, and the position is still open (*Science*, 14 April, p. 137).

"The need has not changed, it has only intensified," says Robert M. White, president of the National Academy of Engineering. "There needs to be some focus on the civil side of the federal government."

Thomas J. Murrin, the number two man at Commerce, has the background to guide technology policy after a 36-year career at Westinghouse. But he is loaded down with responsibilities for day-to-day activities in the department and does not have the time to pay much attention to getting new technology initiatives under way. Thomas A. Vanderslice, until earlier this year chief executive officer of Apollo Computers, Inc., has frequently been mentioned as a potential candidate to fill the undersecretary position, but word now is that he has turned down the job.

Also missing at Commerce is a director for the National Institutes of Standards and Technology. Congress gave NIST new responsibilities for supporting industrial technology in last year's trade bill, but the Administration didn't include any funds for them in its budget request and Congress appears unlikely to give the agency so much as an inflation increase in its core budget. NIST may nevertheless have to implement several of the new programs anyway, because they are pet projects of congressmen anxious to get the technology policy ball rolling.

Military technology policy is in no better shape. At a time when the Defense Department is facing a major



Erich Bloch's 6-year term as NSF director ends next year. Deputy director John Moore does not have a fixed term of office and is a holdover from the Reagan Administration. The assistant directors are chosen by the director. Robert Sanchez will formally take over the Math and Physical Sciences post next June.

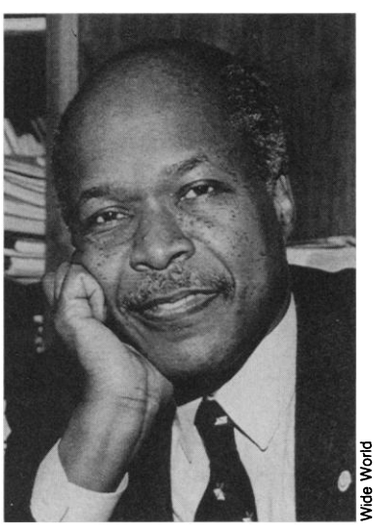
budget crunch and multibillion-dollar technology projects—including the Strategic Defense Initiative—are being reevaluated, defense science policy is missing a top player: the director of defense research and engineering. Robert C. Duncan, who now fills the job, has been nominated for a different Pentagon post. The White House's Untermeyer says filling the research slot is now a top priority.

Over in the Department of Health and Human Services, efforts to fill top science posts have been hampered in part by a perceived need to find people in tune with the Administration's position on abortion. At least one candidate for director of the National Institutes of Health has balked at being vetted for his views on this issue (*Science*, 6 October, p. 27).

There has been a difference of opinion among some senior Administration officials on whether a candidate's views on abortion should be taken into account at all in selecting people for jobs such as the director of NIH. James O. Mason, assistant secretary for health, told *Science* the NIH director should be chosen "for his or her scientific, human, and managerial skills and not where they stand on some of these policy issues. I think the policy decisions have to be made by the people who are in policy positions."

But a few days later, Untermeyer told *Science*, "Clearly a candidate for a major position at NIH and HHS should be asked what his or her position on abortion is and the extent it conforms with that of the President," if for no other reason than it will be one of the first questions asked "by the press and the Congress and various interest groups."

HHS secretary Louis W. Sullivan seemed to settle the matter at a meeting last weekend of the Association of American Medical Colleges. Sullivan says the senior HHS positions—to the level of the assistant secretary—should be filled by people "who not only possess expertise, but who also reflect [President Bush's] broader values and priorities, as defined in his commitments to the public. In the case of administrators beneath that level, however—the leadership of the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and other major federal agencies—it has been our policy that standards of scientific and administrative excellence and leadership prevail in the selection process."



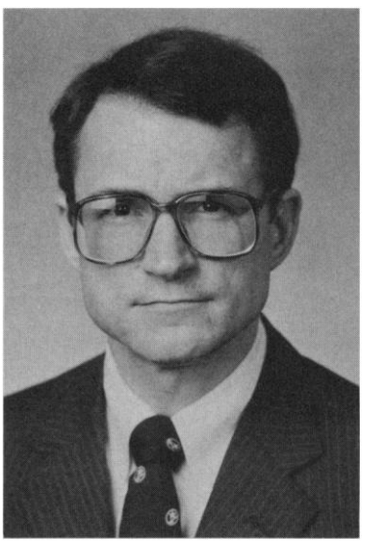
Louis W. Sullivan: *In choosing an NIH director, "standards of scientific and administrative excellence and leadership prevail."*

Whatever the reason for the delay, the failure to appoint an NIH director is "sending exactly the wrong message to the scientific community," says Carol Scheman of the Association of American Universities. Without a director of NIH, the scientific community loses a voice in the debates over the use of fetal tissue in research and how scientific misconduct should be handled. And as the financial demands of AIDS research and the human genome project grow, NIH will have to fight harder to maintain its support for other areas of research. "You really need strong, substantive political leadership in that position," says Scheman.

One position that has had some strong—and controversial—leadership in the past few months is the Energy Department's research office. Ironically, however, the leadership has come from a Reagan Administration holdover, Robert O. Hunter. Until he resigned last week as director of the Office of Energy Research, Hunter had been trying to seize the initiative in several policy areas, notably fusion energy (*Science*, 15 September, p. 1182). But without a clear vote of confidence from the Bush Administration, it became clear that Hunter's days were numbered and policies put in place during his stormy tenure may soon unravel.

In contrast to the general pattern, at least some federal agencies are well stocked in the upper ranks. NSF, for example, is missing only a single associate director. Part of the reason is that, while strictly speaking the director and deputy director serve at the pleasure of the President, the director has a 6-year term and is typically retained from one Administration to the next. NASA, too, has most of its slots filled despite earlier departures.

The White House science advisory apparatus is also finally getting some warm bodies. The decision last April to nominate D. Allan Bromley as President Bush's science adviser raised hopes that at least some high-level science policy issues would get attention while working-level posts were being



Chase Untermeyer: *"Clearly a candidate for a major position at NIH and HHS should be asked what his or her position is on abortion."*

filled. But Bromley wasn't confirmed by the Senate until August, right before Washington's annual summer exodus, which meant that he was barely a factor until after Labor Day.

Since then, he's thrown himself into the job with a passion, winning high marks for his energy and zeal to make the Office of Science and Technology Policy a major player in policy decisions. But even with the best intentions he starts at a disadvantage. "The science adviser came on late; he's still getting his feet wet," says Representative Ritter. "I think he is capable and interested in doing a lot of the things that need to be done."

Representative George Brown (D–CA) says Bromley faces a serious bureaucratic problem because of his late start. Like all presidents, Bush began by surrounding himself with a first team of trusted advisers, says Brown. Bromley came in with the second team and must develop his own political base within the White House.

"He's a very good man and he spent a lot of time working with executive branch advisory groups on science," says Brown. "But it's just not in the cards for him to have the same sort of clout as the people who helped Bush get elected."

Coming up with a coherent federal policy on science won't be easy under any circumstances. "If you had a some kind of strategic vision, it would be a great deal easier," says Ritter. And without the appropriate people, it's going to take a long time to develop that vision. Says Carey, "I think the government has put itself in a serious box."

■ JOSEPH PALCA

Staff intern Quentin Story contributed to this article.