How Varmus Got the Job

Shortly after taking over the Department of Health and Human Services, Donna Shalala asked her friend Howard Temin to suggest possible candidates to be director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Temin, a Nobel laureate at the University of Wisconsin—the university Shalala presided over for 5 years—came up with three or four names, but he warned that one was a longshot: fellow Nobelist Harold Varmus of the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). "He gave me Varmus' name and said I couldn't get him," Shalala laughs. Indeed, "Lots of people said I couldn't get a bench scientist of the first rank," Shalala told *Science*.

Shalala thrives on challenges, but she didn't pick Varmus simply because Temin said she couldn't get him. With the help of assistant secretary of health Philip Lee and deputy assistant secretary D.A. Henderson, Shalala persuaded UCSF biochemist Bruce Alberts, who now heads the National Academy of Sciences, to chair a six-member search committee, which included two women and one African-American.* "I wanted a well-represented committee that the scientific community thought was competent," says Shalala. The committee began work in early April and, except for one face-to-face meeting on 28 April, it did all its work by telephone conference calls and faxes.

One of the first items of business was to decide what kind of person they were looking for. The number one concern, says committee member James Wyche, associate provost at Brown University, was that "the person's research credentials had to be impeccable." The White House made it clear that being female or a minority would be an added attraction, though committee member Samuel Thier, president of Brandeis University and former president of the Institute of Medicine, stresses that "we were never pressured to do anything." Shalala adds that Vice President Al Gore simply advised her to "find an outstanding scientist."

The committee made a master list of names, says Thier, with each member suggesting a handful of people. Names were added from letters sent to the committee, suggestions made by Shalala's office and Congress, and individuals who had applied for the job. Not surprisingly, the list soon swelled to more than 50 names. The committee ranked the candidates, placing about 15 in the top category. The White House personnel office then weighed in with its own list of 60 or so people, who, says Alberts, were "of very mixed quality." Mixed or not, more than a dozen names on the White House list—including Varmus'—were also on the committee's master list.

The committee members, says Wyche, wanted to "look at candidates beyond resumes." So, with Lee's blessing, on 28 April, they began interviewing the dozen top candidates by telephone. One minority candidate made it to this stage but did not make the final cut. "The committee and I personally felt disappointed about not being able to advance a minority," says Wyche, who is black. And, as Shalala was warned, many top candidates bowed out along the way. "About half the people we were interested in weren't interested," said Alberts.

From the outset, Shalala made it clear to the committee that she wanted to know the pros and cons of the top candidates. "I've run enough search committees to not ask for a first choice, because you get cornered if you don't like it." So the committee offered her four names on 19 May: Varmus; Yale provost Judith Rodin, a behavioral scientist; Patricia Donahoe, a pediatrician at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard; and William Danforth, chancellor of Washington University. Shalala herself then began interviewing the candidates, and, she says, "a couple of them pulled themselves out." Shalala adds that "some of the other candidates urged me to get Varmus if I could get him."

Varmus wasn't immediately convinced that he wanted the job. "He came in loaded for bear," says Shalala of her interview with Varmus. "But I'm fairly sophisticated at the care and feeding of first-rank scientists." Part of that nurturing included allowing Varmus to run his own lab at NIH.

On 23 June, Shalala transmitted her choice to the White House. According to a source who has seen the letter, she "strongly recommended" Varmus and "mentioned" Rodin and some other names whom the source declined to divulge. Shalala says "the president didn't take very long at all" to settle on Varmus, although it took until 3 August to announce his decision.

As for her friend Temin, Shalala jests that she intends to hold him responsible for Varmus' performance.

–Jon Cohen

* The three committee members not mentioned in the story were: Elizabeth Neufeld, chair of the biological chemistry department at the University of California, Los Angeles, who spent 21 years at NIH; William Richardson, president of Johns Hopkins University; and Linda Wilson, president of Radcliffe College.

activist Martin Delaney of Project Inform in San Francisco raised what he claims are widespread but not widely proclaimed concerns—about Varmus' lack of experience as an administrator, his lack of involvement with the AIDS community, and his aversion to political influence in the setting of research goals (*Science*, 9 July, p. 156). Some AIDS activists are particularly nervous about Varmus' opposition last year to a proposal to expand the power of NIH's Office of AIDS Research. Varmus and his colleague Marc Kirschner, now chairman of cell biology at Harvard, lobbied against it as a potential threat to peer-reviewed research. In an effort to mend fences, Varmus met last week with a delegation of AIDS activists led by Mark Harrington, leader of the Treatment Action Group. All Varmus will say is that "I enjoyed our conversation; I learned a lot about their position," and "I don't see any major conflicts."

Some of the issues raised by Delaney may surface at Varmus' confirmation hearing, and Varmus is reluctant to discuss policy matters until then. He is, however, already on the record on several issues affecting NIH, thanks to a manifesto he co-authored with Bishop and Kirschner in *Science* (22 January, p. 444). The trio made a pitch for increasing the NIH budget by 15% a year, funding 30% of all approved extramural grants (some institutes have had a funding rate as low as 15%), splitting the agency off from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), strengthening the "authority of the director over the individual institutes," involving outside scientists more in the direction of NIH, developing new ways to transfer science to biotech companies, and shielding basic research from political mandates.

Varmus already seems to have dropped the idea of an independent NIH, however: He says he's no longer worried about fighting his way through layers of bureaucracy at HHS because he's on very good terms with "the two people above me in the hierarchy, Phil Lee [the assistant secretary for health], who has become a friend of mine and is very accessible, and Donna [Shalala, secretary of HHS]." Their openness and compatibility "made the whole thing seem like a much more attractive job," he says.

A public scientist

Even if he isn't concerned about his relations with HHS, Varmus faces a big challenge in mastering the political side of NIH and the