

Dissecting a Biomedical Victory

When it comes to influencing Congress, basic science can't compete with corporations and laser-sharp single-interest groups. But even without a million-dollar campaign kitty or polished lobbyists, one scientific group has so far protected its interests on Capitol Hill this year: biomedical researchers.

That group's latest achievement was its stunning victory on 24 May in the U.S. Senate. Senator Mark Hatfield (R-OR) persuaded his colleagues to reject a plan drawn up by senior Republican Senator Pete Domenici (R-NM) that would have reduced funding by 10% next year for the National Institutes of Health (NIH)—a “devastating” proposal, as NIH Director Harold Varmus called it. Instead, the Senate adopted, by a vote of 85–14, an amendment that would cut NIH's budget by only 1% (*Science*, 2 June, p. 1271). Although the actual NIH budget for 1996 has not yet been set (it will be established by appropriators who begin meeting next week), Hatfield sees the vote on his amendment as a sign of “the political awakening of the biomedical research community.”

The community may have awakened recently, but its first stirrings go back to 1982, when proposed cuts by the Reagan Administration prompted several dozen professional societies to form the “Ad Hoc Group for Medical Research Funding.” Last year, as the Clinton Administration tried to overhaul the health care system, the “ad hoc” network was rejuvenated when its coordinator, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), joined the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) to keep tabs on funding proposals. Along the way, they endorsed a plan by Hatfield and Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), former chair of the Senate appropriations subcommittee that drafts the NIH funding bill, to support NIH with a tax on health insurance premiums. Although the idea went down in the defeat of health care reform, the biomedical groups learned how to coordinate a quick political response—a skill that proved valuable this year when Congress began to slash the domestic budget.

In early May, the House budget committee proposed cutting NIH funding by 5%, and the Senate was rumored to be planning to double that figure. As Senate staffers drafted a budget resolution, some leaders of the biomedical community appealed for help directly to powerful Republicans. FASEB President Samuel Silverstein made several trips to the Hill, for example, taking along such industry leaders as Leon Rosenberg of Bristol-Myers Squibb and Edward Penhoet of Chiron Corp. On 11 May, they met with House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA) to talk about



White knight. Biomedicine's champion, Mark Hatfield (center), feted by Richard Dutton (left) and Robert Rich of the American Association of Immunologists.

biotechnology's contributions to the economy and pointed out that the industry depends on basic biology for new ideas. Silverstein says Gingrich promised to help NIH.

Fortuitously, the Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives—a nonprofit group that promotes neuroscience research—had scheduled a briefing by Nobel Prize-winning researchers and others on Capitol Hill on 16 May. Sixteen members of Congress attended. Among those who spoke about the importance of funding NIH was Representative John Porter (R-IL), chair of the House labor and health appropriations subcommittee.

Meanwhile, back in the Senate, Domenici's committee released a plan requiring a cut of at least 10% for NIH in 1996, followed by a freeze. Once this appeared in print, the biomedical lobby reacted quickly. Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), according to an NIH official, suggested holding a pro-NIH rally in a Senate committee room. The call for logistical help went out to Marguerite Donoghue, a staffer at Capitol Associates, a lobbying firm headed by former Hatfield aide Terry Lierman. Donoghue secured the ad hoc network, now with 180 members, as a sponsor, and she recruited researchers to speak about the value of biomedical research. She also snared several senators, including two powerful Republicans: Hatfield, who chairs the appropriations committee, and Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA), who chairs the subcommittee under Hatfield that drafts the NIH appropriation. Hatfield promised to take the fight for NIH to the floor of the Senate, which was to vote in a few days.

As Hatfield and Specter recruited sponsors for their amendment, AAMC's Dave Moore alerted the ad hoc network via fax. FASEB's congressional relations chief Gar Kaganowich organized a similar alert over the Internet, transmitting more than 13,000 messages over the wires. In addition, the group enlisted help from the 5000 members of the American Society for Microbiology, then holding its annual meeting in Washington, D.C.

A Senate staffer says Hatfield initially had difficulty rounding up sponsors: “We kept picking up one member and losing another.” But the day before the vote, the idea began to win endorsements, and by 24 May it passed easily. In public testimony last week, Hatfield said, “The overwhelming strength of the budget vote was a surprise.” He said he was encouraged that scientists were coming out of their labs and entering the policy debate. “Now that they have arrived,” Hatfield predicted, “I have no doubt that their powerful message will take hold across Capitol Hill.”

—Eliot Marshall

trasts sharply with that of a similar attack on the social sciences in the first year of the Reagan administration. The academy and others quickly and publicly denounced that earlier effort, and Congress restored many of the programs put on the chopping block. “This time, we only heard from the social scientists,” says one Republican staffer. “There was not a large and visible public effort [by leaders of the science community]

to save these disciplines,” Wells adds.

In the end, the NSF bill that the House Science Committee passed last week proposes the same percentage cut for the social sciences as for other disciplines. However, the bill would also force NSF to eliminate one of its seven research directorates—and urges NSF in the bill's report to consider dropping the social sciences directorate.

Even so, Silver can claim victory. “We

moved Mr. Walker a little bit,” he says. “We're convinced his original intention was to eliminate all funding. Wydler viewed [social sciences] as left-wing crap; they've been disabused of that notion.” Wydler declined comment, although a colleague says that the size of the reaction, if not its scope, caught Wydler by surprise. “He barricaded himself in his office and wouldn't come out,” the staffer recalls.