

## CONGRESS

## Science Chair Walker Calls It Quits

lion people worldwide. Far fewer people died in subsequent flu pandemics, but global economic losses can be high. For example, the pandemics of 1957 and 1968 together cost some \$32 billion (in 1995 dollars) in lost productivity and medical expenses.

One priority of all the plans is surveillance, now carried out primarily through WHO. Influenza A is a versatile pathogen that switches hosts, hopping from aquatic birds to pigs to people. In pigs, genes from different subtypes of the virus can recombine to form new, more virulent or infectious strains that can then be transmitted to humans. Such transmission is a problem especially in places like rural China, where ducks, pigs, and people may be in close contact, and that's where many outbreaks originate. So for starters, the new U.S. proposal stresses the need to enhance CDC support of global monitoring for new subtypes of influenza A.

If a new strain is detected, the U.S. plan also recommends setting up a medical SWAT team that could go quickly to the outbreak site, and assess person-to-person transmission and the likelihood of a pandemic. Whether this would be an international team is uncertain, as not much international planning has been done yet.

Should a pandemic seem likely, the plan then calls for the U.S. president to set in motion an emergency program of purchasing and distributing vaccines to everyone in the United States, according to a predetermined priority system. That aspect of the plan worries officials from other countries, however, as they fear that a U.S. policy of vaccinating everyone might exacerbate shortages of vaccines. Not enough of the alternative, anti-viral medications that prevent infection, exist either. "We may easily have a mad scramble internationally for a limited supply of anti-viral agents," says Jane Leese, a medical officer at the Department of Health in London.

Other countries have more restricted plans. John Spika of the Laboratory Centre for Disease Control in Ottawa, Canada, says that his country plans to inoculate health care and community workers first, and then people at high risk of dying from flu. He hopes some vaccine will be leftover for the general public to buy.

To ensure that happens, Spika and other flu experts at this meeting called for greater international coordination of pandemic control measures. The U.S. plan, which is now being reviewed, revised, and expanded, also calls for global approaches. Its final draft, expected at the end of 1996, may come none too soon. The world will likely be spared a pandemic this season, but who knows what 1997 will bring.

—Elizabeth Pennisi

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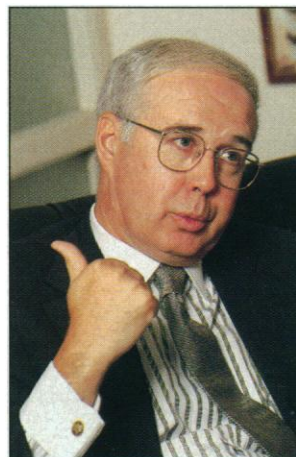
Representative Robert Walker (R-PA), at the zenith of his career in Congress, last week apparently took to heart the old saw of quitting while you're ahead. The House Science Committee chair and close associate of House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA) surprised members of both parties when he announced that he will not seek re-election in 1996.

The congressman, who turns 53 next week, says there is no "hidden agenda" to his decision. "It's just time to move on," he told reporters at a sometimes emotional press conference that earned him a standing ovation from a dozen congressional colleagues. "In case there are any rumors, I'm in excellent political and physical health," he says. "Sometimes you have to take people at their word on why they do things—and I really do believe this is the right time for me to go do something else with my life."

White House Science Adviser Jack Gibbons, a partisan foe on many research issues this year as Democrats fought to preserve technology and environmental programs that Republicans opposed, had only kind words for Walker after hearing the news. "I am sorry I will not have the opportunity to continue working with him in the next Congress," he said. "He has been a strong advocate for science, and the research community will miss his support."

Walker's departure from the House, after 20 years in office, will leave a large gap among the ranks of lawmakers with a serious interest in scientific and technological issues. Named chair last December after the Republican takeover of both houses, Walker presides over a 50-person panel that oversees everything from planetary science to undersea research. In a recent interview with *Science*, he said he reveled in his ability to set the science policy agenda after so many years in the minority (*Science*, 11 August, p. 749).

In his role as chair, he proved a staunch defender of basic research, fighting Budget Committee Chair John Kasich (R-OH) to preserve funding for science in the Republicans' 7-year plan to eliminate the federal deficit. At the same time, he pushed to cut spending for many programs favored by Gibbons and the White House. He also called for consolidating the roles of the current science agencies into a single Department of Science—a proposal spurned by the White House and omitted by Republican budgeteers.



Next. Rep. Walker says he wants to "do something else."

If Republicans hold on to the House in the 1996 elections, Representative James Sensenbrenner (R-WI), who now chairs the science panel's space subcommittee, stands to take over Walker's job. Although the two have clashed over issues such as the nature of Russian participation in the international space station, Walker said "I have no doubt that we would have a very good experience" with Sensenbrenner as chair. Under Sensenbrenner, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) could expect kinder treatment of its Mission to Planet Earth, although the congressman and NASA Administrator Daniel Goldin have sparred over NASA policies toward the space station and shuttle. However, relations with the White House might be better under Sensenbrenner.

Sensenbrenner said later that he wants the job, but according to congressional sources he also covets a more senior slot on the prestigious Judiciary Committee. Representative Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY), a moderate, is next in seniority on the Science Committee. If the Democrats win, then Representative George Brown (D-CA) would likely retake his old job, assuming he survives yet another tough re-election campaign.

Walker said that announcing his decision 4 months before his state's primary election is intended to give Republicans in his rural Pennsylvania district sufficient time to find a strong replacement. He and his wife made the decision last weekend but kept it a secret until a day before the announcement.

Congressional aides say that Walker remains an atypical politician even though he has worked on Capitol Hill for 30 years, first as a staffer. "He's an intellectual, he's quirky, and he's not a fire-breathing legislator," one Republican staffer says. "He's an incredibly talented and strong leader," says a Democratic staffer, who notes that his path to advancement in the House likely was shut when he lost his bid to become whip, the number three post in the Republican hierarchy.

But Walker still has access to the inner sanctums of House Republican leadership for another year, and he pledged to help put a Republican president in the White House. If that happens, he could be in line for a heavyweight slot in a new Administration—perhaps even one in close touch with science.

—Andrew Lawler