POLITICS

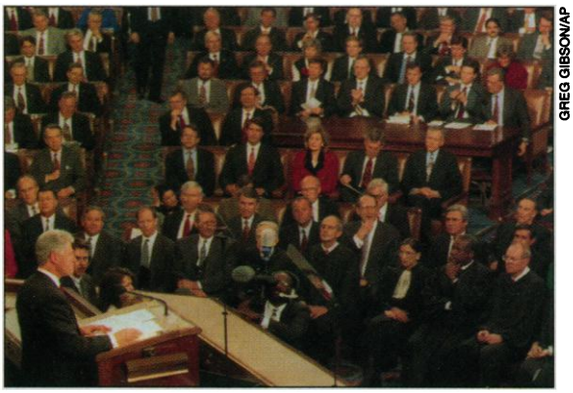
Research Knows No Season As Budget Cycle Goes Awry

If Ecclesiastes was right that to every thing there is a season, then this winter should be a time for the president to unveil his budget for fiscal year 1997, for congressional oversight committees to begin poring over each agency's request, and for lobbyists to begin seeking support for specific programs. But this year the federal budget knows no season, and the result is uncertainty of Biblical proportions.

Almost halfway into the 1996 fiscal year, the struggle between the Republican Congress and President Bill Clinton has left several research agencies operating on their fourth temporary budget of the year, one which expires on 15 March. The uncertainty over the 1996 budget has also delayed until the end of March—2 months behind schedule—the release of a detailed request for the next fiscal year, which begins on 1 October. At the same time, the prolonged negotiations on a 7-year balanced budget—conducted at the highest levels and behind closed doors—have all but ignored research issues. And last week President Clinton talked for an hour about the State of the Union without once mentioning science. So it's no wonder that the scientific community is becoming increasingly worried that research may be forgotten in the scramble to put the government's financial house in order. "What scares us most is not that there is any anti-science mood," says Robert Park, public information director of the American Physical Society (APS). "It's that we are not even being considered."

For the National Institutes of Health (NIH), that indifference has its advantages. Circumventing traditional funding procedures, Senate Appropriations Chair Mark Hatfield (R–OR) and Representative John Porter (R–IL), who chairs the spending panel that oversees NIH, quietly pushed through a 5.7% increase for the agency through the end of September (*Science*, 12 January, p. 136). But other advocates for research have been less successful. Representative Robert Walker (R–PA), chair of the House Science Committee, said last week that he and his allies failed to convince their colleagues and the White House to agree to full-year funding for the National Science Foundation (NSF), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and the basic science components of the Commerce Department. "We couldn't get any help from the Senate or the Administration, but we hope it will still be on the table in March," says Walker. A White House staffer disputes his account, however, saying that senior White House negotiators "are unaware of any offers made along these lines."

In the interim, NSF and NASA will continue to operate on a 6-week share of a 1996 budget passed last fall by Congress but vetoed by Clinton for reasons unrelated to science. That arrangement actually allows NSF to spend money on research at a slightly higher level than in 1995, while providing education, major facilities, and academic infrastructure with the amount requested for 1996. NASA officials say they are relieved to get a prorated portion of a $13.8 billion budget, which is $400 million below its request but higher than levels set previously by the House and Senate. But more controversial programs fared less well. The Commerce Department's Advanced Technology Program will get a prorated 75% of its 1995 budget of $340 million, and the Environmental Protection Agency will operate with 14% less than last year.



GREG GIBSON/AP

Running late. Clinton failed to highlight his new budget, or science, in his State of the Union address.

As the budget negotiations drag on, science policy-makers worry that even favored programs could be sacrificed on the altar of deficit reduction. "The battles are over Medicare and Medicaid and balancing the budget," says Nicholas Samios, director of Brookhaven National Laboratory and the new chair of the planning committee of APS. "If discretionary spending is slashed, then science could be cut in that buzzsaw."

Spurred by this threat, organizations like APS are sounding the alarm. "NSF has gone practically unnoticed by members of Congress," APS President Robert Schrieffer and President-elect Allan Bromley wrote last week to members. "It's time for scientists, particularly NSF grantees, to be heard." On 15 January NSF Director Neal Lane offered the same advice, telling the annual meeting of the American Astronomical Society in San Antonio that "we can seize this time as one of opportunity to work together in ways we have never done before, to raise our voices, together." Walker said he hopes that scientists will pressure the White House to agree to fund a final spending bill for NSF and NASA. And sources say that House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R–GA), in a meeting with Bromley, criticized the scientific community for failing to lobby more effectively. Bromley declined to discuss the content of the meeting.

In their letter, Schrieffer and Bromley say that grantees should take their cue from NIH's more aggressive constituency, but it's not clear whether other fields can emulate NIH's success. "NIH has a different profile" from other research agencies, notes David Moore, government relations chief at the Association of American Medical Colleges. "We're all concerned about our health and disease—no one wants to die."

An effort by Representative George Brown (D–CA) and Senator Joseph Lieberman (D–CT) led the White House last month to request $40 million more for NSF's $2.23 billion research account in 1996 (*Science*, 19 January, p. 281). But congressional appropriators are finding it hard to reconcile that request with the needs of housing, veterans, and environmental programs in the same bill. For their part, NASA officials say they don't intend to beat the drum for more funding. "It would be poor political judgment," says NASA legislative chief Jeff Lawrence, citing a White House order that agencies should not cut any special deals with Congress.

Others echo that cautious approach. "We need to be circumspect in how we approach this," says William Colglazier, executive officer of the National Academy of Sciences. And George Washington University political scientist William Wells compares science programs to "water drops on a shaking dog. Things are at a level that is probably out of reach of logical argument from members of the scientific community."

Instead, Colglazier and others hope that the underlying support in Congress for research will eventually pay off in adequate budgets for most science agencies. And their preference for discreet, behind-the-scenes discussions is in line with something the Biblical preacher wrote a long time ago. "The words of the wise heard in quiet," declared Ecclesiastes, "are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools."

–Andrew Lawler