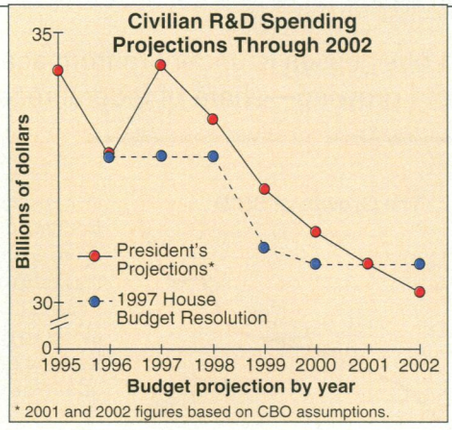
SCIENCESCOPE

edited by JOCELYN KAISER

R&D Budget Suffers Bipartisan Blow

Which political party is more supportive of research and development? New budget figures reveal that neither side can claim that honor.

An analysis by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS, which publishes *Science*) finds that both Congress and the White House plan to cut civilian R&D spending by almost a quarter over 7 years. The 1997 House of Representative budget resolution contains a 23.9% decline in civilian R&D spending through 2002, if inflation is taken into account. Meanwhile, a new analysis of the president's 1997 request shows a decrease of 24.5% over the same period. The White House initially projected an upswing after 2000 (*Science*, 29 March, p. 1796), but the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) has rejected that increase as unrealistic after deciding that the Administration's plan would not result in a balanced budget. Last year AAAS projected that the House budget resolution would cut R&D spending by 33%, but Congress didn't make all the 1996 cuts proposed in that game plan.



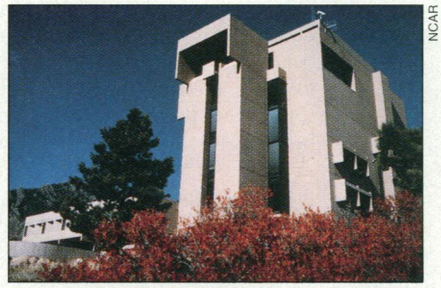
The biggest difference between the two long-range projections is the slope of the curve. The White House shows an increase for 1997, to $34.4 billion, followed by a sharp drop to $30.2 billion in 2002. The House resolution would tighten funding more gradually, starting with $32.7 billion in 1997 and ending up at $30.7 billion.

Supercomputer Purchase Stirs Debate

The prospect of a U.S. research lab using federal funds to buy a $13-million-plus supercomputer from a Japanese company has touched off a political storm. The debate pits a buy-American attitude against a desire by scientists to use the best available research tool.

At issue is a forthcoming contract for a new supercomputer to run global circulation models at the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) in Boulder, Colorado, which is funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF). Although Japanese supercomputers rival U.S. machines for some applications, past attempts to use U.S. funds to buy Japanese supercomputers for a federal lab and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have been blocked by political opposition to the idea.

Last month, after learning that the final bidders for the NCAR contract were Minnesota-based Cray Research and the Japanese firms Fujitsu and NEC, Representatives David Obey (D–WI) and Martin Sabo (D–MN) wrote NSF director Neal Lane and White House Science Adviser John Gibbons urging them to buy a U.S. machine to help maintain the U.S. supercomputer industry. Asked about the issue at a congressional hearing, Gibbons said that "competition was a good thing," adding that "I hope it is allowed to operate freely." Last week, in a reply to Obey, Lane said "the technical evaluation of the competing offers has been made with great care and objectivity."


NCAR

Bidding war. Japan's desire to sell a supercomputer to NCAR has drawn concern from Congress.

Obey says he's also concerned about allegations by Cray that NEC is selling its computer below cost. Commerce Department officials met earlier this week to review the matter. NCAR officials said this week that a decision on the award is expected shortly.

Ehrenfeld to Head NIH Grants Office?

A California university administrator has been offered the job of overseeing the review of extramural grants at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). *Science* has learned that Elvera Ehrenfeld, dean of biological sciences at the University of California (UC), Irvine, has emerged from a year-long search for director of NIH's Division of Research Grants, which reviews over 29,000 applications from extramural scientists and helps select winners of about $3 billion in awards each year. Although Ehrenfeld declined to comment on whether she will be coming to NIH, she confirmed that she is a candidate to succeed Jerome Green, who retired last year after 40 years at the institutes.

In addition to her current administrative duties at UC Irvine, Ehrenfeld leads an active molecular biology lab focused on how RNA-dominated processes of the polio virus regulate its infection of mammalian cells. Neither NIH nor Ehrenfeld would comment on whether she will be given the chance—as have other recent recruits to NIH administrative jobs—to bring her lab with her. However, an NIH spokesperson sees no conflict of interest in a grants chief also conducting reseach at NIH.

Fresh Start for French Cancer Charity

When former government inspector Michel Lucas was appointed president of France's scandal-ridden Association for Cancer Research (ARC) last January, he promised to clean house. After last week's meeting of the cancer charity's general assembly—which represents ARC's 500,000 regular donors—it's clear that Lucas meant business. Of the 26 elected members of ARC's administrative council, all but five have been replaced. And Lucas has vowed to remedy other problems, such as high overhead costs, in an effort to restore public confidence in the organization.

The 21 council positions have now been filled by academics and public figures, most of whom have not received ARC research grants or had other ties to the charity—a marked contrast to earlier practice. Lucas told *Science* that many former members left voluntarily in the wake of findings of financial mismanagement, including lucrative awards to contractors. The scandal has led to a sharp drop in donations, endangering hundreds of research grants (*Science*, 9 February, p. 750). The mass resignations, Lucas said, are a way for the previous council to acknowledge a "lack of curiosity" about how ARC was managed.

The assembly also approved other measures proposed by Lucas, including an independent council to evaluate ARC grants and a reorientation of priorities. In 1996 ARC plans to spend 60% of the available $39 million on research, compared to 28% in 1995, while contracts for cancer prevention campaigns will be cut from 19% to 10%, and overhead costs will decline from 53% to 30%.

The head of the new scientific council, Wolf-Hervé Fridman of the Institut Curie in Paris, says he doesn't expect the current mix of fundamental and clinical research to change much. "But there will be much more peer review and transparency before decisions are made," Fridman says.