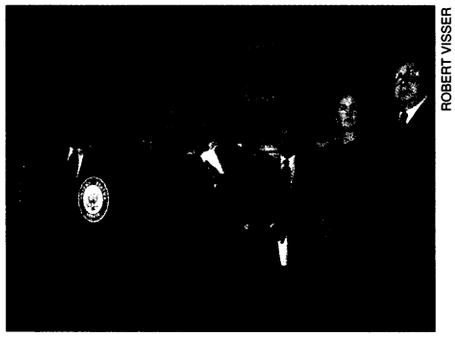
Unity Marks Effort to Bolster R&D

Science advocates are a fractious bunch who eschew the traditional coalition building that other groups use to protect their piece of the U.S. budget. So when representatives of a host of R&D organizations and politicians gathered in the House and Senate last week to develop a joint strategy for boosting the image and the funding of research, the real news may be not what they said, but that they agreed on anything.

The Senate meeting, held in a small room in the U.S. Capitol, was filled to bursting with presidents of scientific and engineering societies, jostling around with Senators Phil Gramm (R–TX), Joe Lieberman (D–CT), and Pete Domenici (R–NM). They met on 22 October after the lawmakers had introduced legislation that calls for doubling civilian R&D spending in the next decade. The next day, House lawmakers—including Speaker Newt Gingrich (R–GA)—kicked off a related project with the help of about 30 distinguished scientists and administrators. They're starting a major study that could revamp federal support for science in a post–Cold War world. These are complementary efforts, says House Science Committee Chair Representative James Sensenbrenner (R–WI), both aimed at winning a higher profile for science. But he and other participants admit it will be tough to turn the rhetoric into dollars.

The Senate measure, called the National Research Investment Act of 1998, proposes to increase civilian R&D from $34 billion to $68 billion by 2008. No companion legislation has been introduced in the House as yet—and even if it were, it would not be binding on appropriations committees, which actually determine spending. Meanwhile, the recent budget agreement between the president and Congress keeps domestic discretionary spending stagnant through 2002. The senators declined to say which domestic programs should be cut to bolster research. Commented one skeptical observer on the bill's showy introduction: "Very impressive, and so is the paneled room."



ROBERT VISSER

Science boosters. Senator Gramm, at podium, and leaders of science and engineering societies call for doubling the R&D budget.

Lieberman admits that "to make this real, we have some work to do." But he and others argue that a booming economy could provide a budget surplus in the next few years, and that the bill can serve as a rallying cry to make sure that some of it gets channeled into R&D. "We thought it was important to set out a goal that people could understand to draw the attention of scientists—and then the nation—to focus on the fact that we are underfunding research," adds Gramm.

Researchers should be an easy sell. More than 100 scientific and engineering societies signed a statement that calls for doubling civilian, as well as defense, R&D in the same period, although it stops short of backing the legislation. Together, they represent more than 3 million people, notes Allan Bromley, president of the American Physical Society. "And that is a number of interest to any politician."

House lawmakers are trying to support the cause through a different approach. At Sensenbrenner's request, Representative Vern Ehlers (R–MI), a member of the Science Committee, has embarked on a yearlong study of federal R&D in an age of intense commercial competition (*Science*, 4 July, p. 28). "We want to show the relevancy of science in today's world, given today's budget problems," says Sensenbrenner. The results, he adds, will be incorporated into a bill next summer that he hopes will spark a national debate about R&D.

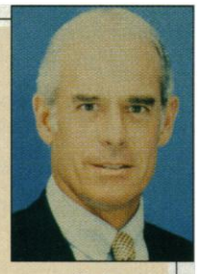
To help with the project, about 30 senior scientists gathered in the Rayburn House Office Building on 23 October to discuss the topic. Gingrich, who called for using a potential budget surplus in part for R&D increases, challenged the group to come up with "a mission large enough to mobilize a nation ... and then make it my problem to go out and figure out how to find the money." He added: "Don't come and tell me how you need $3 million more dollars for the next marginal project that fits everything you're already doing."

But congressional and academic sources agree that the Ehlers report is unlikely to result in immediate changes in science funding. That would require convincing the appropriations committees. "The appropriators do not want us to tell them what to do," says Representative George Brown (D–CA), the Science Committee's ranking minority member, "but they do respond to public opinion." And, he adds, researchers can influence public opinion.

Stanley Falkow, president of the American Society for Microbiology and a participant in both the Senate press conference and Ehlers meeting, says he's confident scientists of different stripes will work together for a common political goal. "Everything has become so interdisciplinary that you can't have your own little place in the sun," he says. "We're all in this together."

–Andrew Lawler

Early Bid on NIH's 1999 Budget



Porter

Capitol Hill leaders who proposed to double federal research funding last week were, for the most part, heads of committees that don't work on appropriations. But at least one who does write money bills—Representative John Porter (R–IL), chair of the House appropriations subcommittee on labor, education, and health and human services—says he will push for a big increase for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 1999. He said NIH is due for a raise of possibly $2.5 billion to $3 billion. Congress still hasn't finished work on the 1998 NIH appropriation, but it might reach agreement in a House-Senate conference this week, yielding an expected $13-billion-plus budget for NIH.

Porter made the suggestion on 21 October at a meeting of the Ad Hoc Group for Biomedical Funding, a loose coalition of professional societies and advocacy groups based in Washington, D.C. He repeated it in a conversation with *Science*. Porter says he recognizes that Congress has "done fairly well regarding biomedical research" in the past few years, and concedes that "other research portfolios have not done as well." So Porter "strongly" favors the effort to double all R&D funding over the next decade. As part of the general R&D boost, Porter says an NIH raise of about $2.7 billion to $2.8 billion could be "in the ballpark," on track for a budget doubling in 5 years.

Might tax cuts interfere with this plan? "There's where Congress and the American people have to choose," says Porter, adding, "We just did tax cuts." In his view, "research funding is about the best funding that the government does. ... It's almost a higher priority than anything else."

–Eliot Marshall