Editorial & Letters

EDITORIAL

The Budget: Too Good or True?

U.S.-based scientists remain astonished at the proposals to bolster most parts of the federal R&D portfolio to all-time highs. President Clinton's 1999 budget differs markedly from the administration's prior offerings of small increases for basic research that relied on Congress to up the ante. This year's budget includes a long-requested increase for basic research in the Department of Agriculture and would provide near-double-digit or larger percent increases for parts of the two major academic research funders, the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health, while holding basic research stable within the Department of Defense. Only NASA's total budget will decrease, and its science could be further squeezed by the space station's anticipated overruns.

Many have worked long and earnestly to bring the economic, educational, and altruistic values of increased investments in basic research to the attention of supporters in the executive and congressional branches. Those efforts have been remarkably successful. A bipartisan group led by Senators Gramm (R-TX), Lieberman (D-CT), Domenici (R-NM), and Bingaman (D-NM) has proposed legislation to double funding for basic research by 2008. Plans were already well under way, with the support of Representative Porter (R-IL), to double the NIH's budget over the next 5 years. Congressman Ehlers's (R-MI) editorial (see *Science*, 16 January) calling for a reformulation of our national science policy was but the latest in a series of bipartisan voices who have spoken through this column and elsewhere to support deeper commitment to scientific research.

Given the president's proposals and this preexisting positive sentiment, the domestic scientific community seems prepared to breathe a collective sigh of relief. The proposed budget numbers seem almost too good to be true. Only an extreme skeptic would seriously doubt that happy days are almost here again. But then, scientists used to the evanescent thrills of a totally unexpected experimental result will be well acquainted with the adage that "if it's too good to be true, maybe it isn't (true)." Before we start spending all those grants to be financed from this new national commitment to research, it may be useful to take a closer look at some of the "little" steps left to be taken.

Now that the president has proposed his budget, the budget game moves to Congress, where three separate processes will be activated: budgeting, authorization, and appropriation. Each function goes through separate committees in the House of Representatives and Senate, whose oversight of the various research agencies is only superficially similar. These fragmented budgetary responsibilities have precluded comprehensive debate to derive a national R&D budget. However, for the first time in nearly 30 years, Congress will be working with an overall budget that projects a surplus. That should make it easier for the budget committees to provide generous spending guidelines for the appropriations committees to respond to the president's proposals.

But will they? Surely, critical political battles lie ahead. Should the additional revenues instead be spent to shore up the Social Security fund, or should that whole system be rethought? Should the predicted revenue surplus be rendered into tax cuts as the Repubican leadership has recommended, given that tax revenues will now exceed any prior peacetime budget? Only when these debates are engaged will the community learn which R&D programs the White House will really choose to defend, and which will be surrendered in favor of other politically popular claimants on the federal budget.

Will there really be extra money to spend on science? The not-so-fine print reveals that the proposed funds for enriching biomedical research are yoked to proceeds not yet in hand to be collected from the national tobacco industry settlement. That agreement is yet to be revised in a form that health officials have agreed to recommend to Congress, and congressional approval will be required. In fact, the settlement remains highly controversial and its prospects in Congress remain uncertain (see page 974). Perhaps the scientific community is not quite able to ignore again the dreaded "p" word—prioritization?

With our readers, we fervently hope that these next steps will go smoothly and that citizens of good mind and purpose will agree on the best next steps to be taken. We'll be watching closely. Meanwhile keep those cards and letters flowing and express yourselves.

Floyd E. Bloom

LETTERS

X-ray Data: To Have or To Hold?

For several years, *Science* policy has required that published x-ray crystallographic coordinates be deposited with a publicly accessible database (for example, Brookhaven Protein Data Bank). That policy recognized the high costs and risks of solving important structures and accorded those who have made such investments successfully the time to reap their intellectual benefits. Wlodawer *et al.* (*Science*, 16 January, p. 306) assert that recent technical enhancements have reduced "the time needed to solve a structure [to less than] than the allowed hold period" and have called for immediate release of the data. In cooperative discussions with our colleagues at *Nature* and other journals, *Science* wishes to evaluate how best to fulfill our responsibilities to the community. We urge readers to respond to a survey now under way (see http://us.nature.com/survey/nsb_poll.nclk) and to us, so that future policy may be modified on the basis of scientific judgement.

Floyd E. Bloom

Multilab Partnerships

Andrew Lawler's excellent article (News & Comment, 23 Jan., p. 470) about the new $1.3 billion Spallation Neutron Source (SNS) to be built by a five-laboratory collaboration at Oak Ridge National Laboratory notes that there are skeptics about the management of such a project and even some who regard it as "more...pork than practicality." The skeptics and readers might be comforted to know that two other accelerator projects have been built by laboratory collaborations that have worked very well. Both are colliding beam facilities at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center (SLAC). The first was built by a SLAC/Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (LBNL) collaboration in the late 1970s, and the second is the ß-Meson factory now nearing completion and being built by a SLAC/LBNL/Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) collaboration.

Having been through this twice, I can