



DOE WEAPONS LABS

Top Official Resigns as Congress Pushes for Management Changes

The controversy over allegations of Chinese spying at U.S. nuclear weapons laboratories claimed its first high-level victim last week with the resignation of Victor Reis, head of the Department of Energy's (DOE's) nuclear weapons program. Reis had clashed with Energy Secretary Bill Richardson over a Senate proposal to revamp oversight of the agency's bomb-making enterprise, which includes laboratories that conduct both military and civilian research. But Reis's departure does little to clarify the status or ultimate fate of the labs and the thousands of scientists who work there.

Reis reportedly supported a sweeping plan, which the Senate could approve as early as this week as part of an intelligence bill, to create a new, independent weapons agency within DOE. Richardson strongly opposes the scheme, calling it a bureaucratic nightmare. The reorganization also faces opposition in the House, where some lawmakers worry that it could weaken the quality of DOE's civilian science programs. In the meantime, Richardson and others have successfully rebuffed an effort to severely restrict DOE's foreign visitors program, which brings thousands of overseas scientists to the labs.

The spying controversy erupted in March after *The New York Times* publicized allegations against Wen Ho Lee, a physicist at DOE's Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico (*Science*, 7 May, p. 882). The charges figured prominently in a massive report released last month by a special House committee investigating Chinese espionage in the United States. Lee, who was fired in April for security breaches, has denied giving nuclear warhead data to China.

DOE critics won a round earlier this month when a special White House panel led by former Republican Senator Warren Rudman of New Hampshire issued a report calling for a massive organizational shake-up. "For the past two decades, [DOE] has embodied science at its best and security of

secrets at its worst," the panel concluded, calling the agency a "dysfunctional bureaucracy that has proven it is incapable of reforming itself." Among its recommendations was shifting DOE's weapons work into a new, semiautonomous agency led by an experienced national security expert.

The report galvanized Republican senators Pete Domenici (NM), Jon Kyl (AZ),



Pressure points. DOE's Reis (below) leaves as Senators Domenici and Murkowski (above) seek to tighten oversight of Los Alamos and other nuclear weapons labs.

and Frank Murkowski (AK), who quickly introduced legislation to implement its suggestions. Their proposal would create an Agency for Nuclear Stewardship to oversee the agency's sprawling weapons complex, including the three nuclear labs and about a dozen other bomb-making sites. It would be led by a high-ranking DOE official reporting only to the secretary, with its own budget and hiring authority, and freedom from DOE oversight on security and environmental issues.

Such independence makes the idea unacceptable to Richardson and other critics, who would prefer a smaller management tweak: the addition of a high-ranking official who would oversee the weapons program. At a 23 June hearing before the Senate Armed Ser-

vices committee, Richardson complained that the measure "undermined chains of command" and that placing the labs' nonweapons research—such as solar energy and climate studies—under the control of a security agency "would be a disaster." In other comments, he suggested that it would erect a "Berlin wall" around the labs' nonweapons work.

In another hearing last week, Representatives Tom Bliley (R-VA) and John Dingell (D-MI), leaders of the powerful House Commerce committee, voiced doubts about the Senate plan. "We need to ensure that we don't trade old problems just to find ourselves with new ones," said Bliley. Other skeptics include Representatives James Sensenbrenner (R-WI) and George Brown (D-CA), leaders of the Science committee, which was set to review the Rudman report on Tuesday. "There are going to be a lot of questions about how civilian science would fare under the security thumbscrews," predicted a House staffer.

Reis, however, told Richardson that he favored the Senate proposal, according to one Senate aide. A Bush administration appointee, Reis is credited with fostering the agency's \$4 billion-a-year Stockpile Stewardship Program. Its goal is to use powerful lasers and supercomputers to simulate nuclear explosions, replacing the tests that were outlawed under the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which the U.S. signed in 1996 but has not ratified. But some legislators have faulted Reis for failing to inform Congress or the White House of the spying allegations. His



support for restructuring the department was the last straw for Reis, according to the Senate aide. *Science* could not reach Reis for comment, but Domenici, Kyl, and Murkowski have accused Richardson of "forcing" Reis out.

The legislative jousting did bring a positive development for science: the defeat of a proposed curtailment of foreign visitors. On 9 June the House overwhelmingly rejected a proposed

2-year moratorium on the visitors program, opting instead for a 90-day time-out if DOE cannot show it has strengthened visitor background checks. Earlier, the Senate approved a similar plan, although its ultimate legislative fate remains uncertain. In the meantime, DOE officials are watching closely as Congress sets a course that could decide DOE's shape for years to come.

—DAVID MALAKOFF

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