



ADVISING GOVERNMENT

DARPA and Jason Divorce In Spat Over Membership

For 40 years, a high-prestige, low-profile group of about 40 academic scientists has quietly been advising the U.S. government on some of the most sensitive technical issues of the day. No longer. Last week the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) announced that over the winter it had ended its sponsorship of the group, known as Jason. The decision, first reported by National Public Radio, was triggered by DARPA's attempt to add three people to Jason's elite ranks. The move, sources told *Science*, triggered a showdown in which neither side was willing to back down.

DARPA and Jason are both children of the government's need for scientific advice after Russia's 1957 launch of Sputnik. But while DARPA is a federal agency, Jason was formed by academic scientists, then and now mostly physicists, who remembered the Manhattan Project and again offered their services to the government. Jason's organization is a little loose, but its membership is strictly controlled: Only Jasons choose other Jasons. The group's name has been the source of endless speculation. But the real story is simple: When physicist Marvin Goldberger, a Jason founder then at Princeton University, told his wife that the government had named the new group Project Sunrise, she said that a more fitting name for problem-solvers would be the sea-faring hero in Greek mythology, Jason.

Some of the group's earliest projects remain current research interests, including remote sensors and antisubmarine warfare. Jason's technical advice has ranged from biomedical imaging to ballistic missile de-

fense to verification of the nuclear test ban treaty. Jasons also laid the groundwork for the laser guide star, which allows the adaptive optics systems on astronomers' ground-based telescopes to rival the Hubble Space Telescope.

Last week, DARPA issued a terse statement thanking the group for its long service but suggesting that it had failed to keep up with the times. During the Cold War, the statement says, Jasons had helped with problems "that were highly physics-oriented." But more recently, the

mine clearing, and Internet security. He also noted that the group, whose members now include chemists, biologists, engineers, and information scientists, is anxious to work on counterterrorism projects and hopes the group can find another home: "We hope we can get back to work ASAP, including studies for DARPA." So does Ari Patrinos, head of biological and environmental research within the Department of Energy's (DOE's) science office, who has worked with Jason for nearly 13 years. "They're a reality check," he says, "I have nothing but admiration, respect, and gratitude for their work."

The underlying cause for the split, according to those close to the situation, is an apparent disagreement over Jason's membership. Last winter, DARPA proposed three new members, but Jason rejected them, saying they did not meet its criteria for scientific standing. That refusal led DARPA to cancel Jason's \$1.5-million-a-year contract, which represents about 40% of its overall budget. DARPA's action also blocked the conduit for funding from other government agencies—including DOE, the intelligence community, and the armed services—thus effectively stopping all Jason activity.

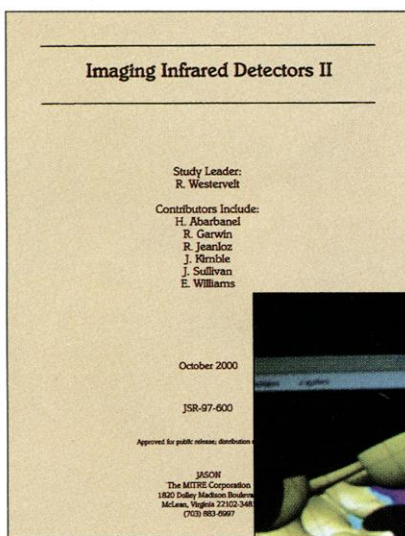
James Decker, deputy director of DOE's Office of Science, which has used the group for many studies, calls the Jasons "diverse people who give very thoughtful advice." Patrinos says that its advice is often "unfettered and sometimes gruff, but one of the greatest privileges of my job has been the interaction with Jason."

Koonin says Jason is seeking another sponsor within the Department of Defense.

In the meantime, DARPA's decision has dealt the group a heavy blow. A 2-week winter meeting for conducting short studies was canceled, and the fate of a brief spring planning session and a 6-week summer session is uncertain. "With all of our experience and expertise in counterterrorism," says Koonin, "I can't believe that we've been sidelined."

—ANN FINKBEINER

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New image? Steven E. Koonin says that Jason studies (above) make a "unique and important" contribution to national security.

DARPA statement says, "technology developments moved more toward information technology, [and] the Jasons chose to not lose their physics character to focus on DARPA's current needs."

Steven E. Koonin, Jason's current head, takes issue with DARPA's characterization of the group's habits. "We feel we have something unique and important to contribute to national security," says Koonin, a physicist and provost at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, citing recent studies on civilian biodefense, land-