Money for Science: Budget Faces Pressure from Vietnam Conflict

With the rising costs of the Vietnam war squeezing the domestic side of the Great Society, the mood among Washington science administrators suggests that federal support for research and related activities is moving into an extraordinarily tight period.

The details, of course, will not be known until Congress acts on the fiscal 1967 budget, which the President will present around mid-January. And, since the budget will not take effect until 1 July, there is the possibility of major revisions in the administration's spending plans. But the science administrators, never a cheery lot in a capital that is yet to share their vision of the value of research, are looking uncommonly gloomy. The rules of the game dictate that no one gives out numbers before the President releases his budget. In addition, since the budget figures are malleable until they are locked in type during the next few days, nothing is final at this point. Nevertheless, it would be prudent for the scientific community to assume that federal support will probably be tighter than at any time since research expenditures began their spectacular growth in 1957, and that, while existing commitments will be fulfilled, it is probably going to be increasingly difficult to obtain funds for new ventures. When the final tally is in, the federal government will still be spending vast sums on research —basic, applied, and developmental— but, since the existing commitments are great and it traditionally costs more just to stand still, applicants for new undertakings might as well recognize that at this point the prospects are not glittering.

In the competition for federal funds, research has been relatively well treated by the politicians, but they have treated it well because they were persuaded of its importance, not because the scientist-recipients of federal largesse wield any political power. But now the squeeze is on, and, in the internal battling for shares of the budget, science can offer logic, eloquence, and reason, but it is neither organized nor inclined to threaten political revenge for what it might consider to be maltreatment. Congress never says no to anything proposed for the Defense budget, and this is reportedly due to rise from its present $52 or $53 billion to at least $60 billion; and, at the same time, the politically popular antipoverty programs are now administratively geared up to absorb greater appropriations, and the constituents are not going to rely on logic, eloquence, and reason to get their share. Furthermore, the bulk of the federal budget is actually composed of items that are legally or politically untouchable, such as interest payments on the national debt, veterans benefits, and agricultural supports. But money for science has a discretionary look; you don't *have* to spend it, and, if you don't, the worst that can be expected is a few anguished letters. Capitol Hill is yet to ring with its first fiery, or even placid, speech on the dire consequences of cutting funds for NSF fellowships.

One of the first indications of economizing with science came earlier this month when the space agency announced that, because of "budgetary considerations," it was halting work on the Advanced Orbiting Solar Observatory. The project, begun in 1963, was to cost $39 million, of which nearly $30 million had been appropriated for the current fiscal year.

NASA made the disclosure during the Gemini flights, and this may have had something to do with the fact that, outside of front-page treatment in the New York *Times*, the observatory's death notice attracted little public attention and no audible protest. But then, cries of rape from the space science program are part of the regular background noise in Washington. Last week it was disclosed that the Voyager shot to Mars will be delayed until 1973, but NASA softened this by announcing that it would send a smaller Mariner photographic spacecraft to Venus in 1967 and two Mariner probes to Mars in 1969.

Meanwhile, budgetary uncertainties have beset NIH. With no clear picture yet on the funds that it might reasonably anticipate for the new fiscal year, the Bethesda administration is withholding the dispatch of funds for grants approved at the November sessions of its advisory councils. All current commitments are being met, but, despite a budget of around $1.2 billion, NIH has very little maneuvering room. Its current budget was only a trifle above the previous one, and out of that sum it had to provide for the new federal pay raise and also meet other increased costs of doing business. In addition, under pressure from the Bureau of the Budget, NIH is looking into the possibility of withholding expenditure of some funds that were supposed to be available for use in this fiscal year. NSF officials say that the money picture is tight, but, again, existing commitments will be met, they say. Among all the agencies, however, one gets the impression that would-be grantees should not base their plans on a kind word from a staff man or on a seemingly favorable attitude to a proposal. A formal commitment is money in the bank, but anything less than a formal commitment legally means nothing.

There were a number of press reports last week to the effect that the AEC's 200-Bev accelerator may be, at least temporarily, a victim of Vietnam's financial needs, but the AEC says it is proceeding on the assumption that it will get the funds to keep the project moving along. According to the present timetable, a site should be agreed upon in the early months of the new year, and then some $13 million would be required for research and the early stages of construction. Another costly project, Mohole, also appears to be moving along, with construction of the ocean-going drilling platform scheduled to start soon, and no indication that it may be delayed.

It has to be emphasized that it is still too early to develop any accurate assessment of what is going to happen to federal support of science in the new fiscal year. But the evidence now on hand should provide little solace for those who have been concerned about the financial future of what is referred to as "little science."

Agency budgets, like the overall federal budget, are full of commitments that, justly or not, are generally taken care of first, before funds are applied to other areas. And, as things turn out, it is much easier to cut back on individual project grants than it is to skimp on support of an existing major facility that has a longstanding payroll. Federally supported research institutions rarely die or fade away; they just get more expensive every year, and it often happens that, when money is tight, it comes out of the hides of people who want relatively small sums.

—D. S. GREENBERG