Frank Press To Be Nominated for NAS

He will be the first White House science adviser to move to Academy presidency

Right from the start, Frank Press seemed the logical successor to Philip Handler as president of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). When NAS members first began speculating on the succession at their annual meeting last April, Frank Press was mentioned again and again as the man with the best shot at the job, although IBM scientist Lewis Branscomb was mentioned prominently also and a fair-sized contingent of biologists said they were rooting for Donald S. Fredrickson, director of the National Institutes of Health. Without formally interviewing a single candidate, the 17 member nominating committee settled on Press (*Science*, 3 October) whose name will be placed in nomination before the Academy's governing council at the end of this month. Approval from the full NAS membership, voting by mail ballot, will complete the selection process.

Although the Academy routinely treats the nomination of officers and other personnel as internal, and therefore confidential, business, there is a feeling among nominating committee members that efforts to cloak the proceedings in secrecy were particularly stringent this year. One reason, some suggest, is that Press is in a particularly sensitive position because of the upcoming presidential elections. As science adviser to the White House, he does not wish to appear to be deserting the President, even though he has made it clear that he would only stay in the White House job for one term in any event. Nominating committee chairman Kenneth Pitzer of the University of California at Berkeley denies the attempt at secrecy is greater than usual. "It is the external interest that is greater," he told *Science*.

One might imagine that selecting a president from among the more than 1300 elect who make up the Academy would sorely test the most proficient of nominating bodies. Not so. Although the committee started out with a list of a couple dozen potential candidates, the criteria set for choosing the Academy president for the 1980s, which include the requirement that he be willing to take the job, narrow the field considerably.

The Academy was looking for someone young enough to be able to serve the maximum two 6-year terms in the presidency (as has Handler), but old enough to have had the administrative experience it takes to run an outfit with some 900 committees, a volunteer force of 7000 outside scientific advisers and a full-time staff of 1100. It might be noted that some NAS leaders are also hoping for a new president who agrees with the view that the Academy has grown too big, does too much and, as a result, doesn't always do the important things as well as it could. The recent report of the Committee on Nuclear and Alternative Energy Systems (CONAES) is a case in point. Meant to be a blueprint for national energy policy, the study, which was 4 years in the making, was flawed and dated by the time it came out. There are those who take the extreme view that the new president should reduce NAS activities by as much as 50 percent—though that is unlikely to happen. Press's personal opinion about the matter is not known and there is no evidence the nominating committee has discussed it with him in any detail at all.

At 56, Press is in the right age bracket. And 4 years as White House science adviser, preceeded by years building and chairing the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), give him the requisite administrative experience.

An essential element in the selection of an Academy president is high scientific achievement. The committee, implicitly acknowledging that even among NAS members some individuals have made more original or important contributions than others, took this into account. Inasmuch as the president is chief spokesman for the scientific community nationally, he should have what one person called a "profound understanding of the nature of the scientific process." If possible, he should be articulate, a man with what one member calls "presence."

Press is consistently praised by his colleagues as a man with a deep appreciation of and commitment to protecting the scientific enterprise. His credentials as a geophysicist are impeccable. And he has, White House insiders attest, fought hard for basic research in his dealings with the Office of Management and Budget. Inevitably, perhaps, he has also become somewhat embroiled in election year politics, as the story that follows reveals.

Press's tenure as science adviser to Jimmy Carter has won him accolades from Academy members who see him as their man in the White House but the way he chose to handle his position has cost him friends on Capitol Hill where he is considered unresponsive to congressional demands. Press decided from the outset that he could be most effective as science adviser by being the President's man. Naturally low-key and judicious, his posture has been to try to fit into the White House as staff, doing what the President wants done, limiting his major efforts to projects that are comparatively manageable in scope. For example, he puts great store in two Presidential messages—one on science and technology, one on innovation—that were produced under his direction. Although those messages put the Carter Administration on record as having a pro-science policy, neither was regarded as being particularly visionary.

Press believes that his effectiveness as science adviser is directly related to his willingness to work behind the scenes and maintain a low profile. Unlike Handler, Press virtually never makes controversial statements. As science adviser, he is always careful in public to attribute to the President ideas that are his own.

One of Congress's principal complaints with Press's interpretation of his role centers on his insistence that the science adviser's office be readily available to respond to Presidential requests. Congress thinks he is, thereby, neglecting his mandated duty to "explore emerging issues or synthesize an overview of science and technology in relation to societal issues." Press considers the charge grossly unfair, but Congress says he has failed when it comes to looking ahead, to anticipating the nation's needs. A recent report from the General Accounting Office of the Congress says the science adviser's office's "selection of issues must reflect its broad understanding of how issues relate to each other and what they may mean for the future." Obviously, GAO thinks that isn't happening now.

Although Frank Press's low profile has

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kept the Academy membership at large from thinking of him as a Carter man, perceptions in Washington are otherwise. What effect this might have on his role as NAS president is anybody's guess but seems worth thinking about.

Meanwhile, Academy lawyers are pondering the possible problems that may arise simply as a result of Press having been a senior government employee and, therefore, subject to provisions of the 1978 Ethics in Government Act. That law, which proscribes the dealings government employees may have with their agencies once they leave for private life, was not intended to keep a person like Press from going to an institution like the Academy. But it does place a person in a kind of limbo for at least 2 years when it comes to "influencing" policy at his former agency. A thorough legal interpretation of the situation, which is by no means simple, has yet to be worked out.—BARBARA J. CULLITON

Frank Press's Numbers Game

Even in an ordinary year, it is hard to distinguish fact from fancy in the federal budget, but this year is an extraordinary one. The fiscal planners at the White House have bent, molded, and remolded the fiscal 1981 budget several times to suit the twists and turns of the President's election campaign. The results have been confusing. The President's science adviser, Frank Press, recently got himself tangled in these election-year numbers, for he has been defending the President's record as a magnanimous supporter of research and development (R & D). His efforts won him some criticism in Congress and in the press for overstating the record.

The confusion arises out of Press's testimony on 19 September before the Senate subcommittee on science, technology, and space. The science adviser was asked about the net effect on R & D funding of all the cutting and patching that had been done during the year. The fiscal 1981 budget was given to Congress in January. In March, the Administration withdrew it and reduced spending in order to decrease the projected federal deficit. About $900 million in R & D funding was cut, including about $190 million slated for basic research. Then in August the Administration put out an economic revitalization plan which restored some of the cuts. Carter pledged to commit up to $600 million above planned expenditures in fiscal 1981 and 1982 for new funding of R & D. Academics and others interested in the money have been invited to Washington, D.C., this fall to help the Administration decide how this $600 million should be spent.

At the Senate subcommittee hearing, chairman Adlai Stevenson III (D-Ill.) asked Press about the R & D funding shuffle. Isn't it true, he asked, that the money Carter has pledged to spend this year and next will only make up for part of the loss incurred in March? Press gave the Administration line: "The new funding in the President's economic message will permit an increase in the support of basic research over the 4-year budget period in which this Administration has been in office of 11 percent real growth above inflation." Stevenson expressed skepticism about the 11 percent figure. According to the subcommittee staff, the White House never tried to justify the number with backup data.

Press has now offered *Science* a fuller, though not necessarily more satisfying explanation. He figures that the Administration's aid to basic research (as distinct from the broad category of R & D) began with the fiscal 1978 budget. This budget was prepared by the Ford Administration and was sent to Congress by Carter in January of 1977. Since then, funding of research has grown tremendously, according to Press and his assistant Richard Meserve. In terms of current dollars, the increase through fiscal 1981 amounts to 35 percent they say. In constant terms (1972 dollars), the increase amounts to about 2.5 percent. But Meserve says that one must not forget that the President has promised to commit up to $600 million in extra R & D funding in fiscal 1981 and 1982. The addition, he says, will ensure that basic research funding increases by 3 percent in real terms for the next 2 years. When this promise is "factored in," the real increase in basic research funding during the Carter years amounts to more than 10 percent.

There may be flaws in the White House's method of computation. Some people say it's not fair to count the fiscal 1978 budget as Carter's. But that's a quibble. The important point is the decision to count Carter's $600 million spending pledge as a real commitment. If this chimera is left out, the figures show that the Administration's actual spending on basic research over the last 3 or 4 years has just stayed ahead of inflation. According to Willis Shapley, who analyzes the federal budget each year for the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the promise-less figures for basic research funding show almost no increase in federal support in terms of constant 1972 dollars. When inflation is subtracted out, federal support is a steady $2.4 billion each year since 1979. (See *Research & Development: AAAS Report V*, by Shapley *et al.*, p. 17.)

Nevertheless, if one has a mind to, one can come up with more encouraging numbers. Meserve explained his method of computing the figures as follows. Step one: calculate the increase in the basic research budget in constant dollars from fiscal 1978 ($2.39 billion) to fiscal 1981 ($2.45 billion). It should come to 2.5 percent. Step two: add 4.7 percent. Why? Because the Administration has promised that basic research funding will increase by 3 percent in fiscal 1981, while the actual value of the budget is expected to decline by 1.7 percent. Inflation is causing the decline. Thus, Meserve says, the total 1981 committment will have to be 4.7 percent. Step three: add 3 percent. This is the amount Carter has promised to add to the basic research budget in fiscal 1982, during his second term in office. Step four: add up all the percentages and get 10.2 percent, which in White House math neatly rounds off to 11. Voilà.

After reflecting on these numbers overnight, Meserve telephoned to give an alternative, correct method of figuring. Once the President's pledge has been carried out, he said, the budget for basic research, in constant (1972) dollars, will be $2.568 billion in fiscal 1981 and $2.645 billion in fiscal 1982. Thus the net growth from 1978 to 1982 comes to 10.5 percent. This actually does round off to 11. Meserve concluded: "Nobody can quarrel about a half a percent, can they?"—ELIOT MARSHALL

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