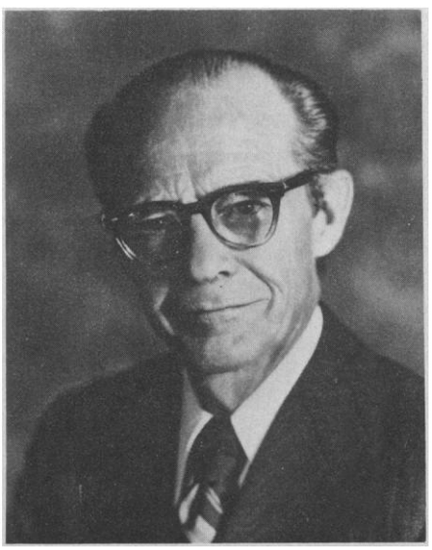
# Nutrition Research: End of an Empire

*The Department of Agriculture has axed its Human Nutrition Center, a $30-million unit that raised the ire of meat producers*

A controversial era in the conduct of nutrition research and the formulation of U.S. nutrition policy came to an end in June when Secretary of Agriculture John R. Block announced the closing of an administrative unit that for almost 3 years had emphasized research on the link between diet and disease and had vigorously promoted U.S. policies that stressed healthful diets as a means of avoiding such chronic diseases as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and cancer.



**Put imprimatur on controversial guide**

*Harvard nutritionist Mark Hegsted was the Director of the Human Nutrition Center.*

The unit, known as the Human Nutrition Center (HNC), issued in 1980 the politically controversial *Dietary Guidelines*, which recommended that Americans avoid consuming too much fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol. Given USDA's oversight of school lunch and food stamp programs, the *Guidelines* had the potential for direct and sweeping effects on the American diet. However, soon after the Reagan Administration took office, USDA stopped publication of the *Guidelines*, and on 17 June Block announced that the HNC was dissolved and its divisions redistributed to various USDA agencies.

The nutrition unit had come under fire on two fronts. Producer organizations—especially the meat, egg, and dairy industries—lobbied vigorously against dietary policies they felt discriminated against their products, and some scientific groups said the *Guidelines* promised more in terms of disease prevention than they could deliver. On the research front, the unit was locked in a bitter turf war with the Department of Health and Human Services over which bureaucracy should have the U.S. lead in the conduct of research into diet and the prevention of disease (*Science*, 8 June 1979, p. 1060, and 15 June 1979, p. 1175). During its short tenure, the USDA unit made considerable gains in this area, adding large facilities in San Francisco, Boston, and Houston to its research empire, and reached a budget of nearly $30 million a year.

Empire building has now come to a halt. "It looks as if there will be a deemphasis on human nutrition in the Department of Agriculture," says Mark Hegsted, former director of the HNC and, before that, a professor of nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health. The fracturing of the unit's functions ensures that USDA human nutrition programs will cease to expand and will no longer threaten to compete with other research programs in the federal bureaucracy.

The unit was exceptional within USDA because it emphasized consumer rather than producer interests, and it explicitly linked for the first time the conduct of research in human nutrition with the formulation of policy.

The unit was founded by congressional mandate after a series of hearings were conducted and publications issued by the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition, chaired by former Senator George McGovern (D–S.D.). In 1977 the McGovern committee published the controversial *Dietary Goals for the United States*, a prescription for what the public should eat to avoid "the epidemic of killer diseases." Radical in tone ("Americans should eat less meat"), *Goals* was hailed by health food fans and loathed by certain food associations. Language from the *Goals* was put into the 1977 Farm Bill, which authorized the creation of a center for human nutrition in the Department of Agriculture. By 1978 USDA had created the Human Nutrition Center and had established for the first time in the office of the secretary the post of nutrition policy coordinator. In 1980 the center issued the *Dietary Guidelines* in collaboration with the Department of Health and Human Services. They were considered by many nutritionists and physicians to be moderate in tone. In outline, they advised Americans to "eat a variety of foods; maintain ideal weight; avoid too much fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol; eat food with adequate starch and fiber; avoid too much sugar; avoid too much sodium; and if you drink alcohol, do so in moderation."

Despite the relatively mild tone, the *Guidelines* immediately came under siege by certain food producers, especially the meat industry, which tried to get Congress to cut off the USDA funds used for publication of the *Guidelines*. The *Guidelines* were nonetheless distributed free to the public, although the furor did have the effect of slowing the implementation of *Guidelines* philosophy into the myriad food programs administered by the Department of Agriculture. When the Reagan Administration came into office, the demise of the *Guidelines* as a policy base was virtually assured. (Before joining the Reagan Administration, Secretary of Agriculture Block was a hog farmer in Illinois, Deputy Secretary Richard Lyng was executive director of the American Meat Institute, and Bill McMillan, Assistant Secretary for Marketing Programs, was a lobbyist for the American National Cattlemen's Association.)

Predictably, the demise of the *Guidelines* has not gone down well with consumer-oriented groups that had vigorously backed their adoption. "The meat industry had taken over the Department of Agriculture," says Michael Jacobson, director of the Washington-based Center for Science in the Public Interest. "The emphasis is very different from that of the Carter Administration. Rather than trying to prevent disease, they are espousing policies that will contribute to major health problems." Disagreeing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with this assessment is John Bode, Deputy to the Assistant Secretary for Food and Consumer Services. "The reorganization is an attempt to strengthen the role of nutrition information and education. It is not an attempt to de-emphasize human nutrition and the prevention of disease, as some have contended," he says.

Although the public information programs of the unit and the publication of the *Dietary Guidelines* were nationally the most visible and controversial aspect of its work, it was the HNC research programs that riled the federal bureaucracy and had the potential for making a substantial long-term impact on the USDA policy-making apparatus. During its nearly 3 years of existence, the HNC had doubled its number of national facilities for human nutrition research, going from three to six. The new centers challenged the preeminence of established programs at the National Institutes of Health. For instance, HNC started a program on infant nutrition at the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston that

# Keyworth to Review Space Program

George A. Keyworth II, President Reagan's science adviser-designate, made his debut before a congressional committee on 20 July, and delivered some forthright views on science policy. He said he is interested in securing some stability in funding for basic research, called the state of equipment in the nation's graduate schools "disgraceful," and indicated that he intends to play an active role in a broad array of policy matters.

The occasion was a hearing, called by Senator Harrison Schmitt's (R–N.M.) subcommittee on science, technology, and space, to consider Keyworth's nomination as director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP). Since Schmitt played a leading role in bringing Keyworth's name before the White House, the exchanges were extremely cordial and no opposition to the nomination surfaced. Approval by the Senate is now virtually assured.

Keyworth, who has been working at OSTP as a consultant for the past 2 months while his nomination has been pending, said that he has already established a "definite niche in the team" in the White House, and that he has "almost invariably" been brought into considerations of science and technology issues. He also said that he expects to brief the President personally on some issues rather than just routing papers through Reagan's senior advisers, and announced that he intends "to work with, not for" the Office of Management and Budget.

Asked whether he intends to establish a mechanism for securing advice from the scientific community, Keyworth replied that by the end of August he hopes to have made arrangements "to bring in the top scientists in America who are committed to the goals of this office." He has already indicated, however, that he has no intention of simply resurrecting a committee modeled on the old President's Science Advisory Committee (*Science*, 10 July, p. 183).

One of OSTP's first major assignments in the Reagan Administration is likely to be a full-scale review of the nation's space program. Indicating that "there is considerable concern in the Administration on the future direction of the space program," Keyworth told the committee that Reagan will soon issue a presidential directive requesting the study. He said that it should be completed by the end of the year, in time to influence the fiscal year 1983 budget, and that it will look into both civilian and defense aspects.

Asked for his views on the state of scientific education in the United States, Keyworth said he believes it is approaching "a point of crisis." Although he studiously avoided offering any specific solutions, he suggested that two serious problems in graduate education in science and technology are the "disgraceful" and "deplorable" state of scientific equipment, and the difficulties faced by graduate students in obtaining adequate fellowships. It so happens, however, that the Reagan Administration's budget—which was prepared before Keyworth came to town—sought to eliminate a National Science Foundation program designed to upgrade the quality of university equipment and proposed a reduction in support for graduate fellowships.

On energy policy, Keyworth placed himself firmly in support of the Administration's goals. Nuclear power, he believes, has been the victim of unsound policies. "I believe that this country has mismanaged an industry and a technology that we developed in the first place," he opined, and added that he expects President Reagan's forthcoming statement on nuclear policy will help to provide a more favorable environment. As for renewable energy resources, Keyworth said that he believes "the probability of solar energy supplying a large percentage of the nation's energy needs is asymptotically approaching zero." Former President Carter's goal of meeting 20 percent of the nation's energy needs with renewable resources is "unrealistic," he told the committee.

*Nominee hot on lasers, cool on solar power*

Constance Holden

In response to a barrage of questions on laser weapons, Keyworth said he believes laser technology "may represent the only credible antiballistic missile technology in the future," but cautioned against launching a crash effort. The Department of Defense should restructure its laser programs toward basic research rather than systems development, he said.

Keyworth's first appearance on Capitol Hill indicated that he has acquired detailed knowledge of many government science programs. It also showed an unusual willingness to give explicit responses.—COLIN NORMAN


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overlapped some of the programs at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Another example is the HNC program at Tufts University in Boston that would have focused on the nutritional needs of the elderly. In 1979, Congress appropriated $21 million for construction of a center at Tufts, and it would have eventually had an operating budget of nearly $10 million a year. In contrast, the nutrition research budget at the National Institute on Aging in 1979 was $3.1 million.

The fate of some of the new centers is now up in the air, according to former HNC officials. "Tufts was to have been finished next summer," says Hegsted. "And I can't imagine anyone leaving a 15-story building empty, so I guess that the program there will be all right. Baylor may be in a little tougher position because they have a program but no facility."

The directors of centers that already have established programs will now report to the regional administrators of the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), rather than reporting to the director of the Human Nutrition Center. This bureaucratic arrangement implies a de-emphasis on the role of central USDA coordination of the human nutrition research programs, although ARS administrator Terry Kinney says such a change will not affect the drive of the programs. "We will give human nutrition just as much attention as it got in the past, and we're going to make these programs work."

The cornerstones of the HNC research empire were laid in 1979, and the normal pace of research insured that few projects had time to develop to the point that they could have an impact on policy before the unit was dissolved in June. However, Hegsted says that there were at least two areas of research that would have soon had an impact: research on the link between dietary fat and blood pressure, and work on dietary fiber. "Even with the closing of the HNC," says Hegsted, "these programs might still make an impact if everyone communicates with each other." Whether that will be the case remains to be seen. In the meantime, it is clear that a controversial era has drawn to a close. A unique mission of the HNC was to take the insights provided by basic research and feed them into the USDA policy-making machinery, whose seemingly infinite cogs affect the eating habits of millions of Americans. Whether this approach was right or wrong seems less important than the fact that a nucleus of people at the HNC in a short time succeeded in putting a little new life into one of the oldest and most entrenched of Washington's bureaucracies.—WILLIAM J. BROAD

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# Reagan Energy Plan Reluctantly Unveiled

## *Administration sees growing use of coal and nuclear power but limited role for renewable energy resources*

Six months after taking office, the Reagan Administration has issued its first comprehensive energy plan. A paean to the virtues of free enterprise and a warning on the hazards of government regulation, it lays out an energy policy that differs sharply from those of previous administrations. The plan provides the first indication of how Reagan's energy policy makers see their free market philosophies affecting energy supply and demand over the next two decades.

The document envisages oil imports holding steady until the mid-1980's and declining thereafter, coal production rising sharply, and nuclear power expanding by a factor of 4 by the year 2000. As for renewable resources, the Administration has clearly abandoned President Carter's loudly proclaimed goal of meeting 20 percent of the nation's energy needs with renewables within two decades. Even including hydropower and geothermal energy, their share will be less than 10 percent in 2000, according to the plan's projections.

***Reluctant planner***

*Secretary of Energy James B. Edwards*

The very notion of producing an energy plan was evidently anathema to an Administration that does not favor central government planning. The document, which is required by Congress every 2 years, is crowded with statements that energy policy should be set by market forces and not by the federal government. Even the title, The National Energy Policy Plan, reflects this philosophy, for the Carter Administration's efforts were called National Energy Plans I and II. The word policy was inserted, says J. Hunter Chiles, director of policy planning and analysis in the Department of Energy, "because this document represents a policy, not a rigid plan."

The centerpiece of the Reagan energy policy is the decision, taken within the first few weeks of the Administration, to decontrol the price of domestic oil. If oil prices are allowed to rise, the Adminis-


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