

Watkins Takes the Helm at DOE

Admiral James D. Watkins, President Bush's choice to head the Department of Energy (DOE), says the most serious problem before the department is the operation of the nuclear weapons materials production plants and the nuclear waste program. The DOE weapons program has failed to keep pace with the operating standards of the civilian nuclear power industry, he told members of Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee during a confirmation hearing on 22 February.

Watkins plans to overhaul much of the department's organization if his nomination is confirmed by the Senate. He assured committee members that he would be "extremely active in all parts" of DOE operations and that he would shape a new comprehensive energy policy for the country. He stressed, however, that his top priority is to straighten out the weapons program.

The retired admiral contends that a fundamental change must be made in the culture and attitude of personnel working at production plants. Over 35 years of operation, the heavy emphasis on producing plutonium, tritium, and other materials, he says, produced a system that downplays health and safety. "Problems related to safety, health, and the environment have not only been backlogged to intolerable levels, but in effect hidden from public view until recently."

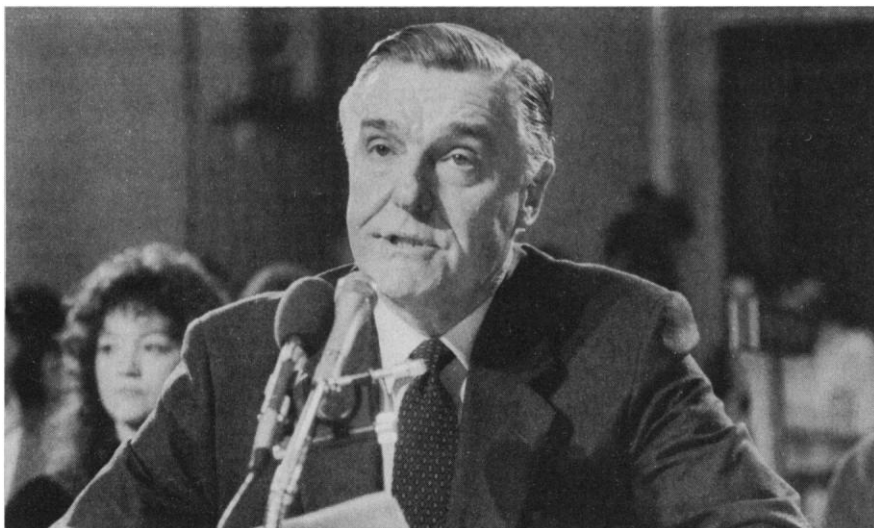
The department's nuclear waste disposal program office, which repeatedly has pushed back its deadline for opening an underground repository for civilian and defense wastes, in some ways "presents nearly the same challenges as the weapons production complex," says Watkins. He concurred with Senator Bennett Johnston's (D-LA) assessment that the program "is in a shambles."

Congress got few hints from Watkins about what might be in store for the basic research programs managed by DOE's Office of Energy Research. Watkins expressed concern about low government pay scales for scientists and engineers, but did not say whether he would request higher salaries for DOE researchers. He did, however, emphasize that the department's national laboratories will be expected to step up their efforts to transfer new technologies stemming from basic research to industry.

While acknowledging that much of his professional life has centered on the operation of the nuclear navy, Watkins says he will pursue a balanced energy policy based on a "sensible economic mixture" of proven energy resources. He said that the department's clean-coal program, which could provide up to \$5 billion in matching federal grants to demonstrate advanced coal combustion and cleaning processes, "will be one of my greatest personal interests."

At the same time Watkins says he will be an advocate of energy conservation and renewable energy resources such as solar power. "This is a technology. . . . It is a very definite product with a barrels-per-day equivalent that is very significant." Even so, Watkins indicated that he was inclined to support Administration plans to cut back research in these areas in fiscal year 1990.

■ MARK CRAWFORD



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surprising, given the vehement opposition to in vitro fertilization by the powerful antiabortion lobby. Finally, last July then secretary of HHS Otis Bowen announced plans to reestablish the ethics board with a broader charter that would cover any ethical issue associated with biomedical and behavioral research and health care delivery.

The proposed charter, published in the *Federal Register*, generated a flurry of complaints from the right-to-life contingent, however, and Bowen did not sign off on it before leaving office. It now falls to the new secretary, Louis Sullivan, whose confirmation was delayed because of the abortion issue.

At NIH, director James B. Wyngaarden does concede, unlike his advisory committee, that something more than the RAC is probably needed, but he won't be pinned down yet on exactly what. The Anderson and Rosenberg experiment is a "significant milestone" that will lead NIH increasingly into social and ethical issues," Wyngaarden told *Science*. "We fully recognize that, and we don't need Rifkin to point that out."

"I wouldn't rule out the possibility that we may set up something at NIH [to address the ethical issues], but I don't think expanding the RAC is the way to do it. And we certainly won't within my lifetime set up anything called a 'eugenics board,'" he says, referring to Rifkin's proposed committee. In his view, Rifkin's proposal was a trap. "Rifkin knows full well what 'eugenics' means. And he knows we do nothing that could be considered eugenics at NIH. It is an inflammatory term, not chosen casually, I think." Wyngaarden notes pointedly that discussions about the need for increased ethical review were under way well in advance of Rifkin's appearance before the RAC.

What Wyngaarden is considering is some sort of broader committee to look at the range of issues associated not just with gene therapy but with the burgeoning genome project—the effort to map and sequence the human genome—as well. Questions of genetic screening and the privacy of genetic data have already come up in the context of the genome project. And while they are not unique to the genome project, any more than they are to gene therapy, they promise to dog it.

The details of the committee, however, are still up in the air. "We have not discussed the mechanism or the timing, and whether it should be here, in the [HHS] department, or if the congressional committee will suffice." Wyngaarden may find his options limited, however, depending on how the fledgling congressional board and still non-existent HHS board fare in the coming months.

■ LESLIE ROBERTS