

At Rockefeller, Wiesel Is The Calm After the Storm

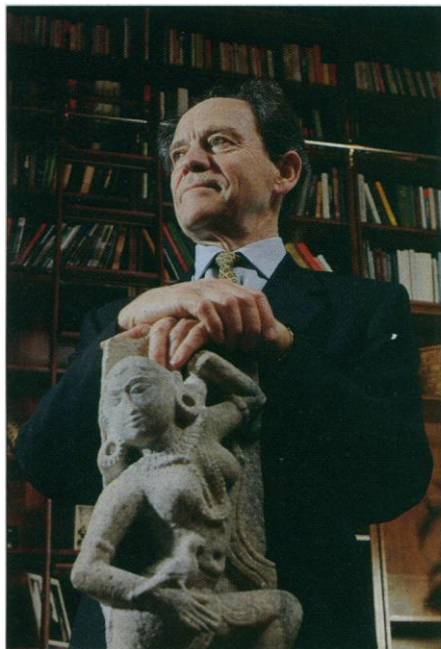
Rockefeller University's president of 18 months, Torsten Wiesel, moves with a genteel, unassuming manner about his office. His wood-paneled bookcases are filled with primitive and ancient art from Wiesel's personal collection and the Rockefeller archives. On the sill of a large, low window are two stone figures of Hindu dancers. The dancers face outward at people passing by on a walkway that crosses Rockefeller's ivy-twined enclave on Manhattan's Upper East Side. "They used to face inward," says the 69-year-old Swedish-born psychiatrist-turned-neuroscientist, who won a Nobel Prize in 1981 for his work on the neurobiology of vision. But Wiesel felt the effect of the statues' placement was exclusive, so he "turned them outward so people would feel welcomed."

Turning those stone figures outward speaks volumes about how Wiesel administers this distinguished—but troubled—research university. A 10-year veteran of the Rockefeller faculty, Wiesel stepped from the ranks last year to

take on not just the presidency but a \$12 million deficit in a budget of \$100 million. He also faced deep divisions in the faculty created by the tumultuous 17-month presidency of his predecessor, Nobel laureate David Baltimore, who was forced to resign by mounting faculty opposition and controversy stemming from his defense of Thereza Imanishi-Kari, a colleague accused of scientific misconduct. Yet building up the ledger books and healing the divisions of the Baltimore era are only part of Wiesel's larger mission: Reviving an institution whose once-stellar reputation was beginning to fade as its faculty aged.

Wiesel has responded to each of these challenges in a calm, quiet manner, and by throwing open his office doors to anyone with suggestions. Indeed, it is clear that one reason he was picked by Rockefeller's board is that he is respected and liked by many of the

senior faculty, a group Baltimore provoked by what they perceived as arrogance and lack of consideration for Rockefeller University traditions. His successor is burdened with none of those perceptions. "Wiesel is so charming, as many effective leaders are, and people are so honored that he took the time to talk to them, to listen to what they think should be done...that they are much less opposed when things don't go their way," says



Good cop. Torsten Wiesel's soothing manner eases the impact of budget cuts.

Duke University neuroscientist Lawrence Katz, who spent 3 years as an assistant professor in Wiesel's lab.

Ironically, the dramatically different styles of the two men mask a striking similarity in their plans for the university. In fact, Wiesel seems to be playing "good cop" to Baltimore's "bad cop," striving in a more sympathetic manner for goals already laid out by Baltimore—strengthening the junior faculty and cutting back on institutional support of Rockefeller labs. But along with the "good cop" manner comes a concern shared by some members of the Rockefeller commu-

nity. They worry that Wiesel isn't tough enough to carry through on his plans in the face of an institution that is both proud and resistant to change—qualities Baltimore confronted in abundance.

When Baltimore came to Rockefeller in July 1990, the university, once at the pinnacle of biomedical research, had been dragged down by some of the very traditions that made it great. The institution had a unique history of unusually generous financial support for laboratories: Until the 1950s it provided total lab support, and through the 1980s it continued to furnish 30% of the average lab's funding after faculty salaries. (By contrast, its competitors—the Harvards, Stanfords, and MITs—typically don't support their labs at all.) Such generosity helped make Rockefeller a hotbed of innovation: It was at Rockefeller that the first cancer-causing virus was discovered, that

DNA was found to be the genetic material, and that the electron microscope was first used to examine biological specimens.

By the 1980s, however, Rockefeller's tradition of generous support had spiraled into a pattern of deficit spending. Rockefeller's annual spending had crept up to 8% of its \$550 million endowment, meaning not enough money was being reinvested to ward off inflation's shrinking effects on the principal. The resulting financial strain halted the recruitment of big names from elsewhere—a practice Rockefeller had relied on for many of its top senior faculty, including Wiesel himself, who was lured away from Harvard in 1983.

Rockefeller wasn't doing much better in recruiting junior faculty, due to its unusual organization. Junior faculty were not independent heads of their own laboratories, as they are at most U.S. universities, but were appointed as members of labs run by tenured full professors. Occasionally one of these junior people would do a remarkable piece of work and be rewarded with tenure and his own lab, but that was a rare event. In the 1980s some young scientists were brought in as "University Fellows." The fellows ran their own labs, but they had less status than junior faculty at other research universities, and they generally assumed their chances of attaining tenure were slim. Thus opportunities at Rockefeller fell far short of what top young scientists expected: tenure-track positions with full faculty status.

"That was one of the major problems at Rockefeller," says Stanford biologist and Nobel laureate Paul Berg, who until recently was a Rockefeller trustee. "It wasn't a very hospitable place for young people." Something had to be done to change that, Berg adds, and "one of the reasons Baltimore was so attractive to the board [of trustees] was because he intended to bring in a whole cadre of new people and give them independence."

Baltimore began inside Rockefeller itself, giving both the fellows and a group of top assistant and associate professors the title "head of lab," which enhanced their status and independence from full professors. He put some of them on faculty-search committees and added three new positions for them on the academic council, an advisory committee to the president that had previously included nine members, all full professors. And he announced his intention to include junior heads of labs in the faculty senate.

Baltimore also began to promote junior faculty directly to senior tenured rank, something that hadn't happened in many years. That move sent a welcome message to the young faculty that there could be a future for them at Rockefeller. "When Baltimore came...it was a fabulous thing," says microbiologist Elaine Tuomanen, who was promoted to head of lab by Baltimore after she had

spent 10 years in full professor Alexander Tomasz's group. "The feeling before that was that there was no future for young people here."

Baltimore's moves were met with approval by many observers outside Rockefeller. "A place can't build without independent, young, tenure-track appointments," says Paul Marks, director of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York. Marks says the policy of recruiting young hotshots to tenure-track positions "is one with which I am very sympathetic."

But inside the university, some of Rockefeller's older faculty felt pushed aside and left out of the process of change. "His respect for the senior faculty wasn't very high," says Rockefeller cell biologist and Baltimore opponent Gunter Blobel. "There wasn't any collegial atmosphere, and most of the time there was no consultation. It was kind of like the bull in the china store." "So many toes were stepped on," says Tomasz, adding that Baltimore's focus on youth was viewed by many of the older faculty as "a ridiculous cult of the young."

Baltimore claims the real sore point was that by giving some junior faculty more independence, he had, in essence, devalued junior faculty who still worked under senior professors. "The tenured faculty don't want to give up the ability to entice people into their laboratories by offering them faculty positions," Baltimore says. "They did not want to see that position downgraded in any sense by the establishment of an independent junior faculty."

Another Baltimore move hit senior faculty more directly, right in their pocketbooks. He instituted an unpopular 1-year salary freeze and announced plans to scale down institu-

tional support for the labs from 30% to a more modest 15%. Rockefeller's red ink made the move imperative, but it was nevertheless painful to the lab heads who had become accustomed to the support.

The former president concedes he may have acted abruptly, and that more consultation with faculty might have helped his cause. But he insists he had no choice. "I would have loved to have come in here and said I'm going to take a year or two to get to know everybody, to make friends, to let some of the strumdrum calm down, and then I'll start worrying about the problems." But, he says, there was simply no time. "The university was in incredible financial trouble.... We had to act immediately."

The bold moves generated an ill-will that merged with the growing controversy over his handling of the Imanishi-Kari case and snowballed into a faculty opposition to Baltimore's presidency that became virtually unstoppable. When Baltimore resigned in November 1991, the board of trustees turned to Wiesel, who had played a key role during the crisis at the end of Baltimore's tenure by conveying the views of the senior faculty to the board (*Science*, 13 December 1991, p. 1576).

Wiesel began his own tenure with several crucial advantages over Baltimore. For one, as a long-time Rockefeller faculty member he could hardly be perceived as an outsider. For another, he is by nature much more circumspect than Baltimore about stating his own views, and is plainly eager to listen to the positions of others. Wiesel began holding open office hours on Fridays for anyone from security guards to senior faculty to come and speak their minds. And where Baltimore had fueled tensions by freezing salaries, then riding

around New York in a chauffeured Lexus provided by the university, Wiesel continues to walk the 2 miles to work and back every day, just as he had before he was president.

Those stylistic changes came as a breath of fresh air to the Rockefeller campus, as did Wiesel's ways of approaching Rockefeller's problems. Although his general plan is similar to Baltimore's, he is executing it in a more inclusive style. To draw the faculty into the program of budget-cutting, for example, Wiesel established the first faculty finance committee to discuss expense reductions, a very popular move. "They serve as a sounding board for Torsten and [executive vice president for finances Frederick] Bohen," says senior medical scientist Zanjville Cohn. "They have a feeling about what should be reduced and what should be maintained."

"Now the faculty have an insight into financial operations of the university and know where the money goes, and they are among the people who say, yes, you have to reduce the laboratory budgets," says Wiesel. By being privy to the process, he says, they can see "it's not a willful decision of the president who just wants to shrink the laboratories." Nevertheless, he says, continued shrinkage will be required, especially among once-successful labs that are not bringing in grants the way they used to, or labs populated by junior faculty who don't bring in their own support. "Every year you review each laboratory's budget, so you can ask why is this person on the Rockefeller payroll," Wiesel says. "Rockefeller has been a bit loose in that area."

Bohen describes the meetings as "pointed," and says no labs have escaped the pressure to economize. Nevertheless, senior faculty appreciate Wiesel's effort to draw them in to

Rockefeller: The Next Generation



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Young faces at a venerable institution may be keys to the revitalization at Rockefeller (left to right). Crystallographer John Kuriyan, at age 32, is the university's youngest-ever full professor, promoted to that rank by Wiesel. Developmental neurobiologist Mary Beth Hatten is Rockefeller's first female full professor. She was lured away from Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons last year and calls

Rockefeller "a very interactive place." Developmental biologist Ali Hemmati-Brivanlou was hired in a junior faculty position this year. He turned down a position at Columbia and withdrew from consideration for a job at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute at Harvard to accept the Rockefeller job. "There's a huge gap [at Rockefeller] to be filled up," he says. "And we are going to be in the first wave."

the process. "His good humor always comes through, even when discussing budgets," says Tomasz. "It takes a talent to be reassuring to the community, and use persuasion rather than thinly veiled threats." "Torsten is ideal to follow David," says a Rockefeller faculty member who asked for anonymity. "David made the big changes and incurred all the resentment, now Torsten can smooth things out, while still holding the ground."

Wiesel also chooses his battles carefully, going slow when he's touched an area where faculty sensitivities remain red hot. "There are some issues," he says, "on which I think you have to sometimes relent a little bit." For example, while Baltimore angered senior faculty when he considered ending junior faculty appointments within their labs, Wiesel says he expects to continue to approve such appointments. Beyond that, he says he has no intention to push for admission of independent junior faculty to the academic senate, as long as there is senior faculty opposition.

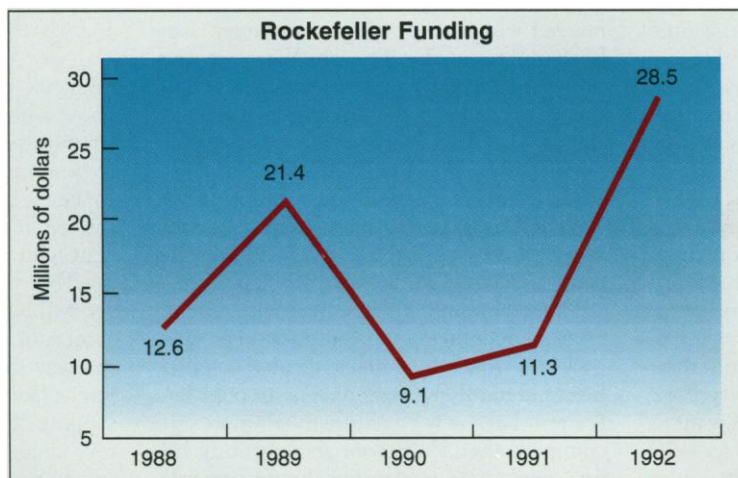
He has, however, counterbalanced that position by taking other measures to ensure that junior heads of labs have their say, such as meeting privately with the junior members of the academic council for an hour before full council meetings. And he has followed Baltimore's lead in wasting no time advancing the careers of worthy young faculty, promoting Rockefeller's youngest-ever full-professor, 32-year old crystallographer, John Kuriyan, who was hired as a university fellow in 1987.

Wiesel's personality and his soothing moves were clearly in order in the immediate post-Baltimore period. Yet some in the Rockefeller community say there is a possible drawback to being a conciliator. Wiesel's calming style and his decision to relent on some difficult points have raised doubts among junior faculty about whether Wiesel really has the steel needed for his job. "We're not really sure if Torsten can, with his different approach, accomplish the task ahead," worries associate professor Tuomanen. Tuomanen and others fret that Wiesel, in heeding the feelings of the senior faculty, will fail to complete the move toward youth and reinvigoration that Baltimore started.

Some of those who know Wiesel well, however, suggest that the velvet glove hides a hand made of harder stuff. "It's very deceptive, how calming he is," says Duke's Katz. "He is a very strong person...he is extremely forceful in getting what he wants." Wiesel himself suggests that his inclusive style does not mean that democracy will prevail on all issues: "I'm not necessarily going to make

decisions based on a vote. Leadership has to mean that you actually lead."

It's too early to tell whether the junior faculty's fears about Wiesel will be born out. Some early indications suggest that he is, in fact, getting key parts of the job done. Wiesel's method of budget cutting by persuasion, for example, may produce results more slowly than draconian measures would, but the university's share of lab budgets has continued to fall steadily in the past 2 years to the current average of 25%. Administrative budget cutting and a more aggressive fund-raising program—initiated by Baltimore—have made a big dent in the budget problems. The fund-raising program brought in \$28 million in fiscal 1992, up from \$11 million in 1991, and



A healthy trend. Donations to Rockefeller have been increasing since the arrival of Baltimore in 1990, and shot up dramatically under Wiesel in 1992.

is aiming for \$30 million in 1993. As a result, the \$12 million deficit has been cut by half.

Just as important as financial numbers for the institution's future is the buzz in the scientific community. And that buzz says Rockefeller is a changing place. "I keep hearing about a lot of exciting things in the works," says Duke's Katz. "The search committees are going after really good people." And they are succeeding. Wiesel recruited four new junior faculty members last year, as well as the first female full professor, developmental neurobiologist Mary Beth Hatten, who was wooed from Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons.

"The old Rockefeller really didn't interest me," says Hatten. But she became intrigued when, through a collaboration with Rockefeller professor Nathaniel Heintz, she saw how the university was becoming supportive of younger faculty—a transformation Hatten calls "the change." She adds that Rockefeller now is "a very interactive place, particularly among this group of junior faculty that have been hired in the last 10 years. There is a lot of commitment in that group to try to see the change through."

This year, Wiesel has six more junior po-

sitions to fill. One position has already gone to Ulrike Gaul, from the lab of developmental geneticist Gerald Rubin at University of California, Berkeley. Gaul says the atmosphere of excitement among the young faculty at Rockefeller was more compelling than what she saw at either Harvard or MIT, where she also interviewed. "The younger senior faculty are great," she says. "I think they are really going to keep the ball rolling." Another new recruit, developmental biologist Ali Hemmati-Brivanlou from Doug Melton's lab at Harvard, turned down an offer from Columbia and pulled his name out of the running for a Howard Hughes Medical Institute position at Harvard to accept the Rockefeller offer. He says part of the attraction of Rockefeller is the generational change that is bound to come as more than 14 senior faculty retire before the end of the decade. "There is a huge gap to be filled up," he says. "And we [new faculty] are going to be in the first wave."

That wave of faculty may find themselves in a university altered in ways beyond an infusion of young energy into the basic biological sciences. Wiesel has plans for reshaping Rockefeller that go beyond the Baltimore-initiated youth movement. He wants to recast it as a broader institution by restoring its strength in clinical and physical sciences as well. He has already hired several young medical scientists, doubling to eight the number of medical research groups that will use the university's 30-bed research hospital, the largest facility of its kind outside NIH. And he plans to fill four positions each in chemistry and physics, to restore some of the breadth that Rockefeller had in the 1960s, under then-president Detlev Bronk. "I would like to see that we have a richer assortment of scientists here than is now the case," says Wiesel.

Such grand plans will require more than gentle talk, of course; something in the nature of a fund-raising windfall will be needed. And the hospital's future hangs on the fate of its \$20 million 5-year grant from NIH, up for renewal this year. Nevertheless, the changing of the generational guard at Rockefeller seems well under way. Indeed, one of the old guard who may be leaving soon is Wiesel himself. He is approaching 70, and he has said his presidency will last only a few years. Before he passes the torch to the next generation, however, he'll have a chance to see whether his policies—and those of the man who preceded him—have succeeded in rejuvenating a storied tradition of discovery and achievement.

—Marcia Barinaga