

# All That's Gold Does Not Glitter

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Keenly targeted to a popular press that was eager for stories of government malfeasance, the Golden Fleece helped catapult Senator William Proxmire onto the national scene. In the process, it dramatically affected the lives of the handful of psychologists who received it.

Former Senator William Proxmire (D-WI), who died last December at the age of 90, had a long and varied political career, but it is the “Golden Fleece of the Month” for which he is primarily remembered. Proxmire and his staff gave the “award” from 1975 to 1989 for what they characterized as “wasteful, ironic or ridiculous uses of the taxpayers’ money.”

Most Golden Fleeces targeted financial mismanagement and pork-barrel development projects. A minority went to scientific projects, and of those only a few went to research by behavioral or social scientists. But the awards for behavioral research — on subjects such as romantic love, the effects of alcohol on aggression in fish, social relations in Peruvian brothels, the effects of “scantily clad” women on drivers’ aggression, the smiling of bowlers, or the sexual habits of Japanese quail — garnered the most sensational press coverage.

For the sake of a catchy headline, Proxmire and his staff sometimes twisted the facts to suit the story and rarely attempted to clarify the nature of the research with the scientists who conducted it.

“He was out to score points in the press and any contact with the participants involved was not to really understand the work,” says Leigh Shaffer, who published one of the first in-depth analyses of the awards in 1977.

Although many politicians have taken potshots at federally sponsored research, no one has yet equaled Proxmire in his ability to garner media attention on these issues. “He did a lot of things during the course of his career, but we still talk about his Golden Fleece Awards because it’s such a brilliant public relations tactic,” says professor of psychology Michael Domjan, University of Texas at Austin. Domjan was awarded a Golden Fleece in 1988 for his National Science Foundation (NSF) and National Institute of Mental Health-supported research on the sexual behavior of Japanese quail.

## Out of the Blue Comes Gold

In March 1975, the first “award” was given out of the blue to psychologists Ellen Berscheid and Elaine Walster (now Hatfield). Hatfield, an APS Fellow and Charter Member, and Berscheid, an APS Charter Member, were pioneers in the study of passion and romantic love; now they had become unwilling pioneers on a different front. They were inundated with critical and even threatening letters and phone calls. Both feel that they were denied federal funding because of the stigma, and both blame the press and Proxmire equally. Berscheid, Regent’s Professor in the psychology department at the University of Minnesota, attributes the loss of her dog, her marriage, her car, and her dream of an early retirement to the Fleece and its consequences. Hatfield, professor of psychology at the University of Hawaii, Manoa,

writes about her experience and her research. Harry Reis contributes some thoughts about the triumph of this and similar research in the face of Proxmire's attacks.

### Fighting Back

Robert Baron, an APS Fellow and Charter Member, was a target of the Golden Fleece in 1976 for his research on heat and aggression — or as Proxmire's press release put it, for a study on "the effects of scantily clad women on the behavior of Chicago's male drivers." Rather than turn the other cheek, as his dean recommended, Baron took his case to the press.

"When I communicated clearly to [reporters] what we had actually done, and that the piece of research that Proxmire had singled out did not cost taxpayers one single cent, I think they really got upset with him," says Baron, who is professor of psychology at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. When the press turned against him, Proxmire quickly backed off.

Another Golden Fleece victim, APS Fellow and Charter Member Ronald Hutchinson, was criticized by Proxmire for studying "why monkeys clench their jaws." Hutchinson, who currently is at the Foundation for Behavioral Research, at the time was serving as the director of research at the Kalamazoo State Mental Hospital. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the Navy had invested \$500,000 in Hutchinson's work, which sought to define objective measures of aggression by evaluating animal behavior patterns — such as jaw clenching — when exposed to aggravating or stressful stimuli. The agencies hoped to alleviate problems associated with confining humans in close quarters for extended periods of time — problematic in both space and undersea exploration.

This is clearly an important area of research with the potential to inform critical issues of national concern. Yet Proxmire denigrated Hutchinson's work and went for repeated cheap shots in an April 18, 1975 speech to the Senate: "The funding of this nonsense makes me almost angry enough to scream and kick or even clench my jaw. It seems to me it is outrageous.

"Dr. Hutchinson's studies should make the taxpayers as well as his monkeys grind their teeth. In fact, the good doctor has made a fortune from his monkeys and in the process made a monkey out of the American taxpayer.

"It is time for the Federal Government to get out of this 'monkey business.' In view of the transparent worthlessness of Hutchinson's study of jaw-grinding and biting by angry or hard-drinking monkeys, it is time we put a stop to the bite Hutchinson and the bureaucrats who fund him have been taking of the taxpayer."

Hutchinson sued Proxmire and one of his staffers for damages of \$8 million. Lower courts rejected Hutchinson's suit on the grounds that accepting federal funding made Hutchinson a "public figure," and therefore immune to attacks of libel and slander like Proxmire's.

Arguing his way to the Supreme Court, however, not only landed Hutchinson a win — declaring him not a public figure — but also set legal precedent and dampened what Shaffer calls Proxmire's "swashbuckling style" in giving out awards. Still, Hutchinson never did collect the money and his grant-getting suffered in years just after he was awarded the Golden Fleece.

## The Big Chill

By the early 1980s, the impact of the Golden Fleece had declined. The novelty had worn off, the legitimacy of many Proxmire targets had become clear, and psychologists and their supporting institutions adapted to his tactics. As APS Executive Director Alan Kraut recalls, the initial response of granting agencies during the Fleece's early years "was to stonewall, to give as little information as possible, to delay." Predictably, that strategy was bound to provoke both Congress and the press, and made a bad situation even worse. But federal agencies gradually became savvier and often engaged in pre-emptive efforts to educate the media about the methods and value of behavioral science research.

[Editor's Note: In the interest of full disclosure, we should point out that Kraut's older brother, Robert, received a Golden Fleece award for his research on "why bowlers smile," which is widely known as a ground breaking study. Robert Kraut [writes about his experience](#), and [Ed Diener describes the importance](#) of Kraut's work.]

By the time he retired in 1989, Proxmire's reputation as an opponent of science had mellowed.

"When he saw something he thought was silly, you couldn't persuade him otherwise," says APS's Alan Kraut, "but that aside, he was a reasonable guy. I recall that he even helped get us funding for a health and behavior initiative at NIH." APS Fellow Richard Atkinson, who served as NSF director in the 1970s, recalled that Proxmire had become a "good friend" to NSF by the end of the decade. Proxmire even gave out "Awards of Merit" to some research grants, though they garnered no attention in the press.

But Proxmire continued to exploit projects that were easy targets because of their subject areas, including Domjan's research on sexual conditioning. Although Domjan recalls the award and its aftermath as a "very disturbing episode," he says the award ultimately had little effect on his career.

He noted there was a broader lesson for psychological scientists.

"You could take virtually any psychological experiment and spin it in a way that would make it a prime candidate for a Golden Fleece award," says Domjan. "It was an attack on the profession as a whole, and that's how we tried to respond to inquiries."

Looking back on the cynicism and gross oversimplifications that nearly undermined her work, and which continues to plague her colleagues, Hatfield says "I think it has had a chilling effect on research."

But we have also been successful in turning back these kinds of attacks. APS Fellow Anne Petersen, former NSF Deputy Director, was in the vanguard of NSF's successful efforts and [offers advice for the field](#).

## Proxmire's Legacy Lives

When Proxmire retired in 1989, the Golden Fleece was retired with him, though its legacy remains in organizations both public and private. Since 2000, a group calling itself Taxpayers for Common Sense has tried to revive the Award, though it focuses largely on regional development projects and corporate subsidies rather than scientific research. However, Proxmire's somewhat diluted legacy lives on in politicians who periodically attempt to single out behavioral research projects as evidence of

inappropriate government funding. In 2003, Rep. Patrick Toomey (R-PA) proposed an amendment to “de-fund” four National Institutes of Health grants for research on sex-related topics.

In response, Rep. David Obey (D-WI), the ranking minority member on the House appropriations committee that oversees NIH, argued that Proxmire’s opposition to “silly-sounding” research — whose results later proved useful — should serve as a warning to politicians.

“We have no business making political judgments about those kinds of issues,” Obey said. The amendment was defeated by a narrow margin. In the past several years, similar amendments have been proposed by Rep. Randy Neugebauer (R-TX.) and passed by the House, but none have yet been made into law.