

# Congress Sees Daily Double on NIH, NSF

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The ponies are off and running in the annual race we call the federal budget process. Competing interests are jockeying for position, and even though the country is no longer saddled with a deficit, it appears that President Bush is trying to rein in spending for science and health, with at least one notable exception.

Since Congress convened in January, the atmosphere on Capitol Hill has been like a race track, where the new Administration's policy issues – tax cuts, environmental policy, education reform, the economy, campaign reform, regulatory rollbacks – have exploded from the starting gate like pent-up ponies confined too long in their stalls. But this isn't one of those Kentucky-Derby-thoroughbred-everyone's-a-champion kind of contest. It's closer to a county fair free-for-all where the riders are barely able to hold on, much less control their ornery broncs as the various entries maneuver to the inside track.

Okay, enough horsing around. Let's see what's happening with the FY 2002 budget for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) – two major sources of federal grants for psychological science research. As the *Observer* goes to press, President Bush just sent his proposed budget for fiscal year (FY) 2002 to Congress.

The president's FY 02 budget proposal jeopardizes NIH's chances of doubling its budget by FY 2003, even though by any other standards, the request for NIH is awe-inspiring.

The five-year plan for doubling NIH requires a 15 percent increase per year. NIH's current budget (FY 01) is around \$20.3 billion. The president's FY 02 request for NIH is \$2.75 billion, which would be only (only!) a 13.5 percent increase. The agency needs an increase of \$3.4 billion to stay the course. That's actually more than a 15 percent increase; it makes up for last year, when NIH got only (only!) a 14 percent increase. While the percentage differences are small, the money involved is substantial; the \$700 million at stake would fund a lot of new research and training.

Candidate Bush indicated he fully supported doubling the NIH budget. Supporters of the doubling movement are portraying his proposed budget as sidestepping that commitment.

## TWO GUYS AND A BUDGET

President Bush's budget for NIH puts him somewhat at odds with influential members in Congress, including Senators Arlen Specter (R-PA) and Tom Harkin (D-IA), senior appropriators and leading supporters of NIH in the Senate, who have been working hard – and successfully – to snag the \$3.4 billion increase for NIH in FY 2002.

In late March, when the Senate deliberated a budget resolution that sets overall funding levels in broad government functions such as health, energy, defense, and so on, the two senators authored an

amendment to add \$700 million to the health category specifically for NIH. It passed overwhelmingly, by a vote of 96-4. That's a pretty convincing referendum, one that has enormous implications for the appropriations bills that follow. Appropriators work within the broader levels established in the budget resolution, and they allocate money for agencies and programs within those functions.

Across Capitol Hill, in the House of Representatives, no one has assumed the mantle of Rep. John Porter (D-IL) who until his retirement last year, was the leader of the doubling movement on that side. His replacement on the appropriations subcommittee that oversees NIH, Rep. Ralph Regula (R-OH), has expressed support for NIH, but has not committed to the schedule for doubling its budget.

#### APS TESTIFIES

APS is an original supporter of the effort to double NIH. This year as in the past two years APS is joining with a number of other science and health groups to encourage Congress and the Bush Administration to keep NIH on schedule to double by FY 03. (APS's support for a separate effort to double the NSF budget in five years is discussed later in this article.)

Appearing before the House of Representatives panel that is responsible for the NIH budget, APS Executive Director Alan Kraut asked the appropriators to support a budget of \$23.7 billion "as the 4th installment of the 5-year doubling plan."

"The rationale for these aggressive increases remains as compelling today as it was in FY 1999, the first year that you and your colleagues in the Senate embarked on this path," Kraut said. "Our nation's health needs, scientific opportunities, and the changing nature of health research all warrant this expansion."

Further, Kraut asked Congress to "help make behavioral research more of a priority at NIH, both by providing maximum funding for those institutes where behavioral science is a core activity, and by encouraging NIH to advance a model of health that includes behavior in deciding its scientific priorities."

In addition to discussing overall funding levels at NIH, APS's statement highlights behavioral science research and training at several individual institutes, including: a translational research initiative linking basic and clinical research at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH); the clinical trials network at the National Institute on Drug Abuse; an initiative on college-age drinking at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism; the need to establish research training support for behavioral science at the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS); the expanded commitment to behavioral science at the National Cancer Institute; cognitive, behavioral and social aspects of aging at the National Institute on Aging; and the child care study and other behavioral activities at the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).

Following the testimony, the new chairman of the House panel, Rep. Ralph Regula, asked Kraut about the connections between mind, body, and health. Specifically, Chairman Regula talked about the role of the role of stress in health, and as a follow-up, he expressed interest in getting information about these kinds of issues out to the public.

During the same hearing, Rep. Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) responded to APS's testimony with comments about a number of behavioral science research issues. He noted the importance of translational research

centers at NIMH and he expressed disappointment about NIGMS lack of training in this area. “Why isn’t NIGMS doing anything in terms of basic behavioral science?” asked Rep. Kennedy.

Turning to NICHD, Rep. Kennedy talked about the connections between education and health, and the impact of cognitive, emotional and social factors on learning. He expressed concern about NICHD’s below-average increases (compared to other institutes), given the institute’s mission to support research on children.

Although Bush’s proposed budget for NIH falls short of the doubling mark, NIH is a clear winner in the budget derby, compared to science, health and social programs, and many other areas of government spending. Despite the widespread support NIH has enjoyed in the past, this year’s increase is coming under fire from several quarters. The Bush plan is seen as pitting NIH against many other health and social programs. The president’s request of \$2.8 billion for NIH is larger than the \$2.1 billion increase he proposed for all health programs, which means reductions in other areas would be needed in order to fund the full request, never mind the additional money needed to keep NIH on schedule for doubling.

The Administration’s budget includes a three percent cut in Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) , and substantial reductions in such public health programs as training for health care providers in medically-underserved areas and in children’s hospitals, AIDS services, minority health, mental health, rural health, and community health programs. Defenders of these programs are vocal in their belief that the NIH increase comes at the expense of these programs.

NIH’s increases are also being attacked from within science, by representatives of disciplines that are not among the core constituencies of NIH. While the connection is not as direct – NIH doesn’t come under the same budget function as NSF, the Energy Department, NASA or other science agencies and so isn’t competing for the same purse – those disciplines are claiming that it isn’t right that NIH gets so much money while other federal science languishes.

#### NSF BUDGET PULLS UP LAME

Bush’s FY 02 budget for the National Science Foundation has pulled up lame. The president requests an increase of 1.3 percent over FY 01 – essentially, level funding – for the basic science agency, which last year received a 15 percent increase as a down payment on doubling its budget over five years. If approved, NSF would receive a scant \$56 million in new money.

Within NSF, the unit that funds psychological science – the Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences (SBE) Directorate is slated to lose \$1.28 million, a decrease of 0.8 percent. SBE. This comes on the heels of a significant increase – close to 20 percent – in FY 2001.

In testimony to the House panel that oversees the NSF budget, Kraut asked Congress to provide a 15 percent increase for NSF, which would bring the agency to \$5.1 billion, up from its current \$4.4 billion. “The increase that you and your colleagues in the Senate provided for NSF in FY 2001 was an important first step in offsetting the comparative underfunding that has been experienced in NSF’s budget in the past several years,” he said.

To illustrate the essential research that NSF would be supporting with this increase, Kraut described AN initiative on the science of learning that APS is facilitating. “This field draws from a variety of research

topics across psychology, such as brain and behavior, learning, memory, perception, social psychology, development, and so on,” he said.

“We have the knowledge base and a critical mass of scientists to help solve the educational and learning issues that have been identified by the government as high priorities,” Kraut told the appropriators. “But getting that knowledge into the classroom is going to require a multi-disciplinary, multi-agency effort. The basic challenge is this: How can we apply and extend our knowledge of how people think, learn and remember, to improve education?”

This area of research, he noted, cuts across many areas at NSF, from science education to the agency’s workforce initiative. “For example,” said Kraut, “the Foundation has been planning a program of Centers for the Science of Learning.... A delay in this and similar programs would mean a delay in the nation’s ability to respond to the urgent, technology-driven need for new ways of training and education at all levels of learning.”

NSF Director, biologist Rita Colwell, identified this research as a priority when she unveiled the NSF budget on April 9. “We’re keenly interested in the science of learning,” said Colwell.

Information on Applying the Science of Learning appears in a [separate story](#).

#### ‘HOW THE WORLD WORKS’

Like those backing NIH, Senate supporters of NSF have been hard at work on behalf of doubling the NSF budget. Leading the pack are Senators Christopher “Kit” Bond (R-MO), chair of the Senate appropriations panel that oversees NSF, and Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), ranking minority member of that panel.

“We continue to believe that investing in basic research should be a keystone of our strategy for economic growth, a better-educated workforce, technological leadership, improved public health, prevention of disease, and national security,” said the two legislators in a letter to their Senate colleagues. They were asking to sign onto a message to the Senate leadership in support of doubling the NSF budget.

The case for doubling the NSF budget is being made in the context of the NIH budget increases, casting it both as a matter of science and as a matter of fairness. Regarding the former, many argue that fundamental research is essential to progress. “It is our strong belief that the success of NIH’s efforts to cure deadly diseases such as cancer depends heavily on the underpinning research supported by NSF,” Bond and Mikulski said in their letter to Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-MS) and Democratic Leader Tom Daschle (D-SD).

Bond went even further. He was one of only four senators to vote against the Specter-Harkin budget amendment to increase NIH, described above, explaining that he voted no “not because I oppose the valuable research that NIH does, but rather because I wanted to draw attention to the fact that we risk focusing on NIH spending to the exclusion of other important initiatives.

“The NIH is important,” said Bond, “but so is the basic scientific research that we do at the National Science Foundation. Basic research is the foundation on which applied science and technology rests.”

“Understanding how the world works has applications in every field, including health. Without increased funding for basic research, we will soon find that our basic scientific understanding is too limited to get the maximum value from the applied research NIH does,” said Bond. Subsequently, Bond, Mikulski and others were successful in adding an amendment to the Senate’s version of the federal budget that would increase NSF by 15.3 percent above the FY 01 level and keep NSF on schedule for doubling its budget.

#### AND THE HORSE YOU RODE IN ON

The fairness of NIH’s large increases is also being raised within science, where rumblings of discontent are growing in the face declining budgets for other federal science agencies. The disciplines aligned with those other agencies – primarily the physical sciences – see biology’s gain as their loss. Frustrated at seeing the large increases for NIH, some have gone public with their views.

In an editorial titled “A Budget Out of Balance” (March 23, 2001), *Science* editor-in-chief Donald Kennedy said that the president’s budget “is likely to please our biomedical readers [but] will disappoint almost everyone else.”

“Does it really make sense for some pieces of the enterprise to be treated very well indeed and others to be held back or cut?” asked Kennedy. [Note to Don: Good point, albeit not an original one. Behavioral scientists have been saying exactly the same thing about the chronic neglect of our sciences.]

Kennedy noted that federal science agencies by and large are targeted for level funding or in many cases, substantial cuts. He attributes this in part to the fact that no science adviser has yet been appointed. “It is hardly surprising that the balance is lacking here, because the offices that could supply such oversight (most notably, that of the director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, the president’s Science Adviser) are dark,” he said.

Another good point, Don. Science has been conspicuously absent from the horse race so far, and the president’s budget seems to a continuation of that. But vacancies don’t tell the whole story. NIH has been without a permanent director for ages, yet the budget momentum remains substantially intact.