

6 The Status of R&D Funding in Congress

Representative Sherwood L. Boehlert

The science budgets the Administration has proposed are too low. The numbers for the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the Department of Energy's Office of Science are especially disappointing. We know that those agencies can productively and efficiently absorb greater increases because they are doing so this year.

I am also very disturbed by the proposed slashing of the research budgets for alternative energy sources and energy conservation because advances in these areas must be an integral part of any sensible, comprehensive energy policy. I am still holding out hope that Vice President Richard Cheney's energy report may revisit these programs.

I am certainly willing to examine the energy programs to see if they can be made more effective. But they are not going to be made more effective by having far less money to spend. And they are not going to be made more effective by being told to tread water for a few years until they can be resurrected with royalties from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), if they materialize. In any event we should not have to deplete one energy resource to find the money to develop another one.

We still do not know what the proposed numbers will be for research spending in the Department of Defense because they will not be determined until Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's review is completed. With the major exception of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the proposed budget leaves a lot to be desired.

Why am I not more concerned? Because these numbers are going to get better. Most likely a little better this year and a lot better next year.

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I say that because support for research and development (R&D) remains remarkably strong in both the Administration and Congress. The Administration's budget this year reflects the President's campaign priorities, which not surprisingly did not include R&D outside of NIH.

The budget does not reflect any hostility toward or ideological grudge against R&D spending. Indeed the budget language already signals an intention to increase spending for NSF in the next budget. Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr., the director of the Office of Management and Budget, has confirmed this impression.

Simply put, the numbers in this year's budget have been offered without prejudice. They were driven by factors outside of science policy. The Administration is already more focused on the need to invest in R&D, even as it continues to put together its science policy team.

Moreover, Congress remains committed to making strong investments in R&D. For example, the Senate voted to significantly increase spending for NSF, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the Department of Energy in its budget resolution.

So what will come of all of these warm if fuzzy feelings toward science? For FY 2002, I think we will see some small improvements over the proposed budget. The final budget resolution provides for a five percent increase in overall domestic discretionary spending, one percentage point higher than what the President proposed. This means that more money will be available for science spending. I will be working with the Appropriations Committee to ensure that as much of that money as possible is allocated to research.

With all the budget machinery controlled by the Republican Party, this year will be different because we will stick to that overall domestic discretionary number. In the past few years, the budget numbers vanished each fall like the Cheshire cat, leaving only a mocking grin. Those days are over. People will have to pay more attention to the bottom-line numbers in the budget resolution than they have in the past.

My final point is a cautionary one. Even though science can draw on a remarkably large reservoir of goodwill, and even though science spending will grow more in FY 2002 and FY 2003 than the current numbers on the table might indicate, the scientific community still has its work cut out for it. That is because the overall projected growth in domestic discretionary spending for FY 2003 and beyond is only enough to cover inflation. The actual figure is likely to be higher than that, but spending growth will be constrained. That means that the competition for federal dollars will be fierce. Supporters of research need to rein-

force the arguments for the federal investment in R&D both analytically and politically. Reinforcing the case for R&D analytically means providing good, solid arguments for specific levels of funding, not just throwing the word “doubling” around as if it casts a magic spell, and it means providing good, solid thinking about what it may mean to have a balanced federal research portfolio.

Reinforcing the argument for R&D politically means working with the Members of Congress back home in their districts and ensuring that business leaders are making clear their reliance on federal R&D. Leaders of the scientific community spend far too much time with their natural allies like me and far too little time convincing newer or more skeptical Members of Congress that R&D makes a difference in their districts and in the nation.

The scientific community must not be complacent and it cannot assume that inherently it has the greatest claim to or most self-evident argument for federal largesse. That is a recipe for failure.

The scientific community must demonstrate that it is bringing its enormous resources to bear on important national problems, especially education. The university community often talks about the link between research and education, but that must be more than just a rhetorical flourish. Universities must focus more on undergraduate education even as they continue to offer world-class graduate programs. Universities and businesses must play greater roles in improving K-12 education. I have introduced H.R. 1858, the *National Mathematics and Science Partnerships Act* to help encourage universities to work with our nation’s school systems.

If research is going to continue to merit large-scale public support, as it must, then the research establishment must rededicate itself to addressing our most pressing and perplexing public needs. That attention will pay off because it will excite the natural curiosity of the young.

I am reminded of some letters I received from second-graders in Cooperstown, New York, (which is in my congressional district) just a few years ago. The second-graders had been asked to send me letters explaining why science is important. One wrote, “Without science, the world would be whacko. There might not even be gravity.” This is someone who understands that a lot is at stake when we talk about science, and with his fractured second-grade logic, the student hit on a larger point as well. When we fail to analyze or understand the world around us, it is almost as if that world ceases fully to exist.

I urge the scientific community to help us understand the value of science, and to take the time to understand the world of politics and budgeting as well. That way each of our worlds can inform the other. In this way the scientific enterprise and the nation will thrive.