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# Los Alamos directors resign after row over sacked whistleblowers

**Geoff Brumfiel, Washington**

Accusations of mismanagement and theft at the United States' most venerable nuclear-weapons laboratory have prompted the resignations of its top two managers.

On 2 January, John Browne and Joseph Salgado stepped down as director and deputy director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. Their resignations are believed to have been requested by the University of California (UC), which has overseen the laboratory for the US government since 1943.

Congressional and Department of Energy officials are now demanding a review of the university's contract to manage the lab, whose once-formidable reputation has been tarnished by a succession of recent crises.

The resignations stemmed from allegations made in November, when two independent investigators hired by the lab released documents that they said showed endemic theft and credit-card fraud at Los Alamos. Laboratory officials said the alleged problems amounted to only a few million dollars, against the lab's annual budget of \$1.3 billion for goods and services. Shortly afterwards, the lab fired the investigators, without giving any public explanation.

This angered the congressional and federal officials who oversee the lab. "The treatment of whistleblowers is a big issue for us," said a staff member on a congressional committee investigating the situation at the lab. This sentiment was strongly echoed by energy secretary Spencer Abraham in a letter sent to Richard Atkinson, the UC president, on 24 December, in which he said that the two investigators' dismissals were "of most immediate concern". Abraham had already dispatched the energy department's inspector general to look into the matter.

The incident is the latest in a string of embarrassing mishaps for the lab, which was the birthplace of the atomic bomb. In 1999, Los Alamos scientist Wen Ho Lee was accused of passing nuclear secrets to a foreign power (see *Nature* 398, 96; 1999); he was later acquitted. In 2000, computer drives containing secret bomb data disappeared from a secure vault and later reappeared



**Bombshell:** John Browne's resignation as director of Los Alamos follows of a series of setbacks at the lab.

behind a photocopier (see *Nature* 405, 725; 2000). Earlier that year, a nearby forest fire had threatened sensitive areas of the lab.

"A whole string of things have been happening over the past few years," says Robert Civiak, a consultant who until 1999 worked as White House budget examiner for the

energy department's national security programmes. "This could just be the straw that breaks the camel's back."

The series of incidents caused the energy department to put stipulations in its January 2001 contract with UC aimed at bolstering supervision and security at the lab. Chief

## Insurers left reeling by disaster year

**Quirin Schiermeier, Munich**

Natural disasters caused record economic damage worldwide of US\$55 billion last year — \$20 billion more than in 2001 — according to an analysis by reinsurance company Munich Re.

The annual survey by Munich Re, which provides policies to back insurance companies, helps climate researchers to match their own predictions against what is actually going on. No one has conclusively tied any increase in the rate of extreme weather events to global warming — but Munich Re analysts predict that global warming will increasingly cause such events.

August's floods in central Europe were the most expensive disaster of the year (see *Nature* 418, 905; 2002), with damage costing some \$18.5 billion, says the company.

But in terms of deaths and injuries, 2002

wasn't such a bad year. About 11,000 people were killed in natural disasters, compared with 25,000 in 2001, when earthquakes hit El Salvador and India.

The company's geoscience research group has been monitoring natural disasters for 30 years, using information from news agencies, the Red Cross and its own branches and clients in 150 countries.

The most notable trend during 2002 was the increase in extreme weather incidents, says Thomas Loster, head of climate risk research at Munich Re. "These observations are consistent with predictions made by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change about more frequent weather extremes," says Loster. "Although single observations are not statistically significant, each is an important element of the climate mosaic." ■

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among these was the appointment of a head of laboratory management for all the labs administered by the university. Retired Ford Motor Company vice-president John McTague was appointed, but resigned in November after trying to appoint a Los Alamos scientist to head the other main scientific laboratory in the US nuclear-weapons programme, the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California. That appointment was overturned by the White House after strenuous objections from Livermore researchers (see *Nature* 417, 3; 2002).

In his 24 December letter, Abraham said that the energy department would conduct a review of UC's contract to manage the lab, which would be completed by May. "There's more reason now than ever for the energy department to consider a body other than the University of California," says Ray Kidder, a retired nuclear-weapons scientist from Lawrence Livermore. But Kidder thinks that a change in the contract would damage the morale of scientists at Los Alamos.

Possible contenders for the contract include the University of Texas, which expressed interest in it in 2001, and the Battelle Corporation of Columbus, Ohio, which runs other energy department labs, including the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee and (jointly with Stony Brook University) the Brookhaven National Laboratory in New York.

Vice-Admiral George Nanos, who previously ran the Threat Reduction Directorate at Los Alamos, will serve as the lab's interim director. ■

## US societies unite in plea for boost to research budgets

**Geoff Brumfiel, Washington**

Science lobbyists have launched a last-ditch attempt to win funding increases for research in President Bush's 2004 budget proposal. But the weak economic outlook and possibility of war mean it could be a disappointing year for US science agencies.

On 27 December, 32 societies signed a letter to Bush and his budget director, Mitch Daniels, urging them to increase research funding in their budget, which will be released on 4 February. "We strongly urge you to increase support for science programmes," says the letter, which cited a string of statements from administration officials and advisers pledging improved science funding.

Earlier in 2002, it points out, the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology called for more support for research in the physical sciences (see *Nature* 419, 3; 2002). And on 19 December, President Bush signed into law an act authorizing a doubling of the budget for the National Science Foundation (NSF) over five years.

But all the indications are that next month's budget won't deliver on these pledges. Because Congress has yet to finalize the budget for the 2003 fiscal year — which began last October — the Bush administration will use its own 2003 budget proposal as a guideline for next year's funding levels. And in some cases, those 2004 numbers are less than what Congress might appropriate for



**Mitch Daniels is being urged to allot more cash to science.**

the agencies in 2003. For example, one congressional source says that Bush will propose an NSF budget of about \$5.4 billion in 2004. This is 9% more than he proposed in 2003 — but actually no more than Congress is planning to give the agency this year.

Other agencies may face similar woes. Several reports suggest that the National Institutes of Health could win an increase of as little as 0.3% to its \$27-billion budget. And a Pentagon source says that laboratories in the defence department are fighting to preserve their fundamental research budgets in the face of a possible war with Iraq.

Meanwhile, the lack of a finalized budget meant that research agencies rang in the New Year still stuck at 2002 budget levels. But it is likely that their 2003 budgets will be agreed in the next few weeks (see *Nature* 419, 657; 2002).

Given the uncertainty of the year ahead, "people have yet to believe that the administration is committed to increasing science funding", says Samuel Rankin, head of government relations at the American Mathematical Society. "It's sort of like 'the cheque's in the mail'." ■

D. R. PATMORE/AP

## British chemists warned of impending stagnation

**David Adam, London**

British chemistry has lost its cutting edge, says a major review of its performance, and now tends to follow where others lead.

The review — conducted by an international panel for the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) — says that chemistry in Britain is "relatively conservative" compared with work in other countries, or even with its own past.

The panel, which was chaired by Harvard chemist George Whitesides, did reach some positive conclusions: the quality of British scholarship is comparable to the world's best, it finds, as are facilities at the top universities. But the chemistry community has failed to embrace multidisciplinary areas of research, such as materials science and chemistry at the interface with biology, it concludes.

"We believe the United Kingdom will benefit if the academic chemistry community becomes more innovative," says

the panel's report, *Chemistry at the Centre*.

The findings will make uncomfortable reading for British chemists, who are already facing a sharp decline in the number of undergraduate students who are entering

the discipline (see *Nature* 416, 777; 2002). "We hope this serves as a wake-up call," says one panel member, who did not want to be identified, "because British chemistry is in danger of becoming marginalized."

The panel says that one reason many British academic chemists are less concerned with innovation is that they tend to have close ties with the mature chemical industry. It adds that the current funding system cannot support long-term, focused programmes, and that the discipline fails to attract sufficient recruits from overseas.

David Clark, director of research and innovation at the EPSRC, which funds most chemistry in British universities, agrees that "people are playing it safe" in the discipline. The agency will discuss the report at an open meeting at the Geological Society in London on 27 January, and will then draw up an action plan to update its strategy for supporting chemistry, he says. ■

