

US funding agencies told to expect a 'new mission'

Washington. Eight months into the Clinton administration, a significant shift in emphasis from "science" to "technology" is gaining unexpected momentum. In its most recent manifestation, the chairman of an influential Senate committee has warned US scientists to expect a major reorientation of their work towards applied research.

"You are getting a new assignment", Senator John Rockefeller (Democrat, West Virginia), chairman of the Senate's Science, Technology and Space subcommittee, told the annual meeting of the National Academy of Engineering last week. "You should not be surprised to see Congress and the Clinton administration question the function of funding agencies", he said.

Rockefeller, whose committee has gained prestige from the ascension of its former chairman, Al Gore, to the vice presidency, spoke in particular of the need for change at the National Science Foundation (NSF).

He effectively backed strong language in the Senate's appropriations bill for NSF, which called on the agency to change its mission in the direction of so-called "strategic" research. The message for NSF in the bill, he said, was to "be more relevant to competitiveness, or don't expect more increases in your budget".

In an unusually blunt exposition which almost certainly reflects the administration's thinking on science policy, Rockefeller said

that the change would extend to other agencies, including NASA and even the National Institutes of Health. He said the need for change was shaped by three phenomena — the end of the Cold War, concern about US international competitiveness, and the views of Clinton and Gore.

In the past, Rockefeller said, winning the Cold War had been the country's top priority, and economic competitiveness had taken a back seat. Alone amongst industrial nations, the US government had made no investment in industrial technologies. The consequence, he said, was that the US found itself with "a major competitiveness problem".

Rockefeller warned that "the old era is over" for scientific research. He added that, despite the widespread impression to the contrary among university academics, this did not mean that Congress was criticizing science as such. But he conceded that many universities interpreted the report language on NSF as "an effort to convert them into applied research centres".

He said the aim was a more limited one, of telling the agencies to do more basic research in strategic areas, as defined by the Federal Coordinating Council for Science, Engineering and Technology. "Fifty-five per cent of NSF money already goes there. We would like that increased somewhat."

Colin Macilwain

Senior German health officials sacked

Munich. The president and director of Germany's federal public health bureau were sacked at short notice last week, leading to speculation that government officials had been suppressing information about the extent of HIV contamination of blood products in the 1980s.

But rather than exposing an AIDS scandal, the episode has drawn attention to the ineptitude of the government's top agency for overseeing health regulations.

Horst Seehofer, the health minister, had been complaining for months that the bureau, which is responsible for monitoring activities in areas such as pharmaceuticals, food and the environment, was neither running efficiently nor keeping him adequately informed on important issues.

Seehofer's patience finally ran out last Tuesday, when the bureau was unable to answer questions about a list of 373 cases of suspected HIV infections contracted through blood or blood products. The list had been put together through the bureau's department for drug registration, and had been presented following a meeting organized to

brief the minister on HIV risks.

The list itself revealed nothing new about HIV infection. Another list of 2,000 similarly infected patients, collated from reports from AIDS diagnosis laboratories, has long been in the public domain. Nearly all of these, including 364 of the partial list shown to Seehofer last week, were infected before the antibody testing and heat-inactivation of blood products became mandatory in 1985.

But the political ineptitude of the public health bureau in presenting the list at a time when the minister's temper was frayed is being seen as an illustration of the health office's apparent inability to make good judgements.

Seehofer complains that the bureau, which since reunification has grown to an unwieldy 3,800 staff scattered over many offices, mostly in Berlin, is unable to predict or prioritize the information he requires.

The precipitous sackings led to press speculation of an AIDS scandal involving a cover-up of the extent of infection due to careless handling of blood products.

Alison Abbott

NASA cites Concorde in boosting funds for aeronautics

Washington. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is to take the lead role in an enhanced federal research programme aimed at helping to restore the dominant position of the US civil aerospace industry in world markets.

NASA managers are increasing their emphasis on the aeronautics aspect of the agency's work, often forgotten by those who see it purely as a space agency. Congress has already agreed to sharply increase NASA's budget for aeronautics research and development from \$855 million last year to \$1,013 million in the financial year which begins this month.

NASA wants to raise the budget further. According to its administrator Dan Goldin, aeronautics will grow by 50 per cent by 1998; "and I don't think that's enough", he adds. The increase will be made at a time when NASA's budget for space research is being sharply curtailed.

John Dailey, NASA's acting deputy administrator, is currently leading a study of US aeronautics research facilities inside and outside of the agency, which will be completed early in the new year. NASA is likely to use the results of the study to press for funding to build new facilities, such as wind tunnels, for it to use in conjunction with leading aerospace firms such as Boeing, McDonnell Douglas and Pratt & Whitney.

Speaking last week at the National Academy of Engineering in Washington, Goldin claimed that America "had forgotten about aeronautics" since it gave up on building a supersonic airliner in the late 1960s. Goldin listed many faults of the Anglo-French supersonic plane, Concorde. But he said that its development programme had paved the way for the subsequent success of Airbus in winning 30 per cent of the world market in long-haul airliners from scratch.

NASA wants the support of the Clinton administration for a fully-fledged programme to develop an economically competitive supersonic airliner, but environmental as well as fiscal concerns make this unlikely for the time being.

The agency is therefore concentrating on attracting funds to boost existing long-term research programmes, and to build some of the aeronautics research facilities which the US aerospace industry desires. Goldin says that Pratt & Whitney and Boeing are reduced to using wind tunnels in France and the Netherlands for some of their work.

Most of the extra money will be spent at NASA's four aeronautics research centres: Langley at Hampton, Virginia; Lewis at Cleveland, Ohio; Ames at Mountain View, California and Dryden at Edwards, California.

Colin Macilwain