BY JEFFREY L. FOX

INFLUENCING (POLITICAL) REALITY SYNDROME

Just as researchers become anxious when writing grant applications and company officials stew over stock offerings, the residents—and aspiring residents—of Washington seem to grow ever more anxious during election years. In particular, a special apprehension gradually builds to epidemic proportions during a presidential election year, with symptoms reflecting the genetic and temperamental make-up of the particular populations at risk.

Certainly the representatives of biotechnology in Washington are not immune to this special, quadrennial epizootic. And 1992 has proved no exception. Indeed, the leaders of both the Association of Biotechnology Companies (ABC, Washington, DC) and the Industrial Biotechnology Association (IBA, Washington, DC) have been showing many of the signs and symptoms often associated with this bug.

It's no surprise. The officials of both trade groups belong to a legitimately susceptible population. Members are especially prone to developing a serious infirmity referred to as "attempts to influence (political) reality syndrome," otherwise known as AIRS. No politically active population of any region is guaranteed immunity from this disorder.

ABC

The telltale signature of the 1992 AIRS strain presented itself early—about the time of President George Bush's State of the Union address. The speech was advertised as the most important oration of Bush's public career. A day later, several leaders of ABC congregated at the National Press Club to comment on the President's speech, marking perhaps the first public instance of the 1992 campaign season in which biotechnologists were directly affected with AIRS.

Rumors before the speech predicted the President would take up the subject of biotechnology and expound on the Administration's then-unsettled regulatory philosophy affecting the sector. The rumors proved groundless, although policy statements from elsewhere in the Administration were subsequently forthcoming (*Bio/Technology* 10:358, April, '92). Moreover, the federal budget that was unveiled shortly after the speech contained a special biotechnology initiative (*Bio/Technology* 10:230, March, '92).

Nonetheless, and without this infor-

mation at hand, ABC officials gathered to urge the Administration and Congress to "make a national commitment to fostering and maintaining America's leadership in biotechnology." In urging this course, ABC leaders compared the importance of building the biotechnology sector to that of the space industry thirty years earlier.

In pleading this case, ABC president Forrest Anthony, who is president of Quality Biotech (Camden, NJ), pointed to the dual benefits of jobs and revenues—particularly the potential for exports and a favorable trade balance—from biotechnology companies. According to Anthony, total sales for the estimated 1,100 U.S. biotechnology and biotechnology-related companies is approaching \$4 billion per annum. And total jobs have grown tenfold, from

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about 5,000 in 1983 to around 50,000. "Americans must choose to support high-tech industries if we are to regain our position of worldwide financial leadership," says Anthony.

IBA

A similar, but more recent, AIRS outbreak came during an April luncheon hosted by IBA officials and held deep in the sub-basement of a Washington luxury hotel. Well-recognized AIRS symptoms include grandiloquence and irregular stock evaluations, both typical of the symptom profile in the biotechnology population.

IBA officials invited representatives of the media to review the trade group's recently prepared "Agenda for Biotechnology," which is being offered to Republicans and Democrats alike. The document includes a set of recommen-

dations that IBA says could be included in either party's platform for the fall elections, although association officials acknowledge that neither party is likely to feature a biotechnology plank. "There may be a reference to the importance of biotechnology in the platforms," says Stephen Duzan, chairman of IBA's board of directors and Immunex's (Seattle, WA) chief executive officer.

Can IBA's (or ABC's) carefully balanced bipartisan approach be sustained? "The Bush Administration has been very supportive of the development of biotechnology in the U.S.," Duzan says, adding diplomatically, "We've not heard comments from the Democrats that would cause me concern, though there are sure to be some disagreements."

One major concern arises in considering the partisan debate over the federal role in health-care reform, according to Duzan. IBA is not endorsing any particular approach to such reform. "Our main goal in health care is that whatever system is adopted, it will not foreclose opportunities to introduce high technology products that have the capacity to reduce overall costs," Duzan says, referring specifically to biotechnology-based drugs and related products. IBA urges that any new system, if adopted, include coverage for "all medically necessary therapies and pharmaceuticals, including all FDA-approved drugs, group C cancer drugs, and any uses which have appeared in peer-reviewed literature or have been included in standardized compendia."

Orphan drugs combat AIRS?

Perhaps the most divisive issue is proposed reforms of the Orphan Drug Act (*Bio/Technology* 10:464, April '92). Rather than falling between Democrats and Republicans, however, the division is more between ABC, which favors reform, and IBA, which wants the law to remain as it is. Yet politics are still at work, inasmuch as members of the Bush Administration are siding with IBA even though influential Republicans in Congress apparently agree with ABC.

Perhaps the real question for the months remaining in this congressional session and before the election will be whether anyone in the biotechnology trade groups will develop orphan drug policies—or orphan drugs—to combat AIRS.