

Science's fate in Congress

SIR — I was puzzled by your leading article praising Republican science policy in the US Congress (*Nature* 378, 115; 1995), particularly in describing Bob Walker, the chairman of the House of Representatives Science Committee, as “an effective leader for science in Congress”. My impression is quite the opposite.

Republicans have made funding for research and development a low priority. Their budget would impose research and development cuts estimated at more than 30 per cent over the next seven years (after inflation), even as overall federal spending would remain roughly constant.

The Republican budget also takes an ideological approach to research and development funding, shattering the bipartisan consensus that had evolved over many years. While sparing some areas of basic research, the budget targets a wide range of programmes in energy and environmental research and civilian technology development. I believe that public funding for these useful but non-commercial areas of science and technology is essential for maintaining public support for science and technology in general.

Finally, Walker has not made the Sci-

ence Committee one whose “output counts for something”, but instead has made the committee largely irrelevant. Decisions are made by the Republican leadership and by the Budget Committee, and rubber-stamped by the Science Committee. Committee members, Republican and Democrat alike, have had little substantive influence.

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Gene patenting

SIR — I am a molecular biologist, with little legal expertise, who is unhappy about gene patenting. I refer in particular to the Commentary article by George Poste (*Nature* 378, 534; 1995). My main objection is the obvious fundamental point: how can a discovery be redefined as an invention? This issue is presented as a legal *fait accompli* and skipped over by Poste. An explanation offered is that gene discovery requires special skills, but the difficulty of making a particular discovery hardly justifies calling it an invention, especially when the techniques involved are now routine. It has taken evolution 3.5 billion years to produce the DNA sequences that constitute our genes, yet at the stroke of a legal pen these can be deemed as human

“genomic inventions”. A not too dissimilar line of reason would have entitled Isaac Newton to patent gravity.

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Unthinking plankton

SIR — Although we have come to expect, but not readily tolerate, teleological language in television programmes on wildlife (including those of Sir David Attenborough) and in popular scientific writing, such a style should certainly not appear in *Nature*. Zooplankton do not “migrate to greater depths to reduce (my italics) their chance of being detected by visual predators (fish)” (L. De Meester *et al.* *Nature* 378, 483–485; 1995). Nevertheless, the paper clearly indicates that their behaviour does have that effect, that is, such migration of zooplankton reduces their susceptibility to predation. This is a statement of fact based on observation and experiment, with no implications that zooplankton had great thoughts about their strategy.

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Yep, but I've transferred my
lab methods to the production hall on
this new UNICORN 2.00 software

