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THE FIRST WORD

GRAMM NEGATIVE

So, this is how it begins. One pays one's taxes, is kind to the very old and very young, tolerates those in between, brakes to avoid small animals, and never crosses against a "Don't Walk" sign. Then one night one goes to bed a crusading journalist and awakes the next morning from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into a special interest—the most loathsome kind of special interest, howling for the life's blood of widows, orphans, pensioners, and the poor. Trying to elbow aside the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard in the annual pork-barrel derby.

One suspects that Franz Kafka, not Senators Phil Gramm and Warren Rudman, drafted the recently signed Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Reduction Control Act of 1985. For those who were asleep in the waning months of 1985, that bill mandates decreases in the U.S. federal spending deficit aimed at a perfectly balanced budget by 1991—a goal bound to please anybody who understands the principle of conservation of energy. If Congress is not able to suck in its gut and make the cuts, the bill says, then the bill will have its own authority to cut the deficit down to size. Fine. But Congress then turned around and adopted a series of 1986 budget measures that exceed the allowed deficit by some \$12 billion in a \$974 billion budget.

Even that would not be so bad, except that Gramm-Rudman has an exception in it for every special interest—except ours, it seems. Out of nearly one trillion dollars, \$709 billion is protected from cuts—social security, debt service, existing defense contracts, welfare programs. If the White House has its way, it would add \$174 billion in defense spending to the protected list, exempting more than \$880 billion all told. That leaves just \$111 billion of apparently "non-essential" spending in which to make a \$12-billion dent. And those expendable programs include, you guessed it, publicly funded health and general scientific research (along with such fripperies as the environment, energy, agriculture, foreign aid, and transportation).

Perhaps we are getting incensed over nothing. At this writing—in those moments between sleeping and waking, that gray limbo between Christmas and New Year's Day when everyone else in the world seems to be out of the office—nobody is quite sure what effect the Gramm-Rudman bill will ultimately have on publicly financed research in the United States. A ten-percent reduction looks like a good bet for 1986. Things could get better.

But we doubt it. In *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka's poor transformed bug hid in his room, living off occasional scraps tossed in by an increasingly distant family—until finally they forgot about him completely and he faded away into a dried husk. Were it up to the U.S. government, it seems, the same would happen to this country's health research. Last year it was the Office of Management and the Budget trying to force "forward funding" down NIH's throat. This year it's Gramm-Rudman. And next year? As Anthony Robbins, a staffer of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, noted the other day, "It seems like I've been doing nothing but damage control for the past four or five years."

With apologies to widows and orphans, researchers, too, have a right to income and dignity—as do the people who make and sell the equipment researchers use. We are talking not about faceless white coats; we're talking about people's jobs and livelihoods and the future of a great technology. Cut them and the whole country bleeds.

The President signed Gramm-Rudman quietly. At about the same time, Marc Lappé was testifying before the House Energy and Commerce Committee, lamenting the privatization of public research. Well, if the public is going to withdraw from the field, cutting expenditures by ten percent as costs are rising, then we are faced with a choice. The research will be done with private funds to fit private agendas...or it won't be done at all.

With the U.S. government apparently intent on divesting itself of its commanding position in advanced biological research, it looks like a good time to go out and buy stock.

—Douglas McCormick