
Science & Technology

NASA and fusion energy program still on the budgetary hit list

by Robert Zubrin

Despite the tremendous national enthusiasm generated by the success of the Space Shuttle, the end of April saw the budgets for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and fusion research still very much up in the air, with an imminent prospect of possible cuts in these areas to funding levels well below even the meager amounts doled out by the Carter administration.

The Democratic-controlled House Space Science and Applications Subcommittee under the leadership of Rep. Ronnie Flippo (D-Ala.) has already marked up the NASA budget without restoring a cent of the \$600 million that Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Director David Stockman cut from the Carter NASA recommendations.

Instead, Flippo's committee opted to simply rearrange enough small change below the Stockman ceiling to keep some of NASA's space exploration programs alive on paper. The House Energy Research and Production Subcommittee, headed by Rep. Marilyn Lloyd Bouquard (D-Tenn.), has similarly capitulated to budgetary austerity by merely adding on \$15 million to Stockman's \$460 million for fusion, arriving at a figure well below the barely adequate support level of \$525 million originally recommended by Carter. According to various fusion specialists, this \$50 million cut would basically put the whole program "on hold"; it deletes the funds required for construction of new, larger test machines for more advanced experiments.

On the Senate side, things look only slightly better. The GOP-controlled Senate Science, Technology and Space Subcommittee, led by former astronaut Harrison Schmitt (R-N.M.), voted in a nonbinding resolution on March 15 to restore \$178 million of the NASA cuts. Since that time, however, Schmitt has come under strong OMB pressure to go along with Stockman's austerity policy, under the guise of "unity behind the President." Aides preparing the committee's budgetary options say it is now an open question how much Schmitt will attempt to restore when the committee concludes its actual markup by May 15. The prospects for even the

\$178 million restoration are said to be remote. This either puts into question or postpones NASA's participation in the Solar Polar mission, the Halley's Comet mission, the Venus Orbiting Imaging Radar, and the Solar Electric Propulsion System, to say nothing of aborting any step toward such projects as a large permanent space station, fusion-powered rockets, or an unmanned Mars landing and return.

The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee headed by James McClure (R-Id.), and its Energy Research and Development Subcommittee, whose chair is Peter Domenici (R-N.M.), have already agreed to accept the \$13 billion overall ceiling recommended by Stockman on energy spending. They have not yet agreed on any specific apportionment of those funds. Last year, both McClure and Domenici were cosponsors of the McCormack act which, as passed and signed into law, established a major program to build a fusion test reactor by 1990 and develop commercial fusion by the year 2000.

Many fusion partisans are hoping McClure and Domenici will use their control over this \$13 billion to restore at least the \$65 million Stockman deleted from Carter's fusion budget by taking it from the approximately \$10 billion Stockman has allocated for non-nuclear energy programs. Domenici has scheduled hearings before his subcommittee for April 30 through May 9. Testimony will come from Alexander Glass of KMS Fusion and Harold Agnew of General Atomic, formerly of Los Alamos Lab, among others. Both Glass and Agnew are certain to strongly advocate restoring the fusion budget. Should Domenici decide to restore the funds, his chairmanship of the Senate Budget Committee will enable him to make the decision stick.

However, if Domenici does not come through, the prospects for fusion do not look good. With the post of White House science adviser still vacant, administration science policy is effectively being made by David Stockman's assistant OMB director for energy, science and technology, Fred Khedouri. Khedouri, whose wife is a "soft energy" aide to arch-environmentalist Congress-

man Richard Ottinger (D-N.Y.), has called the McCormack act "a lot of baloney on a piece of paper" (see below). "Just because they authorized the money doesn't mean we have to ask for it if we don't want to," Khedouri muttered.

It would be ironic if President Reagan, who in his April 28 speech before Congress pointed to the Shuttle as an inspiration "to reach beyond the commonplace and not fall short for lack of creativity or courage," should allow his science policy to continue to be determined by voices such as these.

The following interview with Fred Khedouri, the Assistant Director of OMB for Energy, Science, & Technology, was made available to EIR by an investigative reporter.

Q: I understand that the purpose of the budget cuts is to stimulate the economy. The other day Senator Heflin [D-Ala.] quoted Chase Econometrics as saying that every dollar spent on NASA has produced a \$7 return in economic growth. Wouldn't it be more consistent with the recovery goal to expand NASA's funding, instead of cutting it?

A: Using that logic, you might as well put the whole budget into NASA. There is a limit.

Q: But in light of the success of the Shuttle, hasn't there been any move to reconsider and restore the NASA cuts?

A: The Shuttle is adequately funded. We didn't cut anything from that.

Q: Not from development, perhaps, but how about for operations? There are many people who want to use the Shuttle to build space stations, and other missions.

A: Look, the fact that the Shuttle flew once and landed is meaningless. Working once is one thing, but the real test will be when we see if the Shuttle works thirty, forty or fifty times. You have to get a sense of what the refurbishment costs will be, which can only come after many, many test missions, before we start any big projects using the Shuttle. So we'll just have to wait.

Q: What about the cuts you've made in future energy supplies like fusion?

A: We only did minor reductions in fusion.

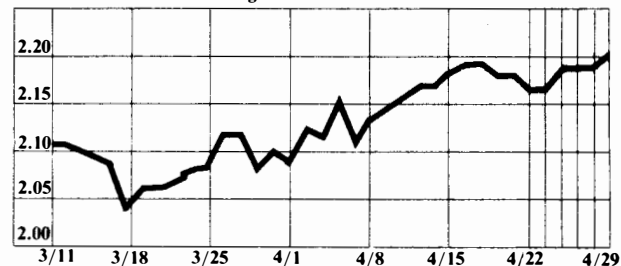
Q: But wasn't there a bill passed last year that mandated an increase in fusion funding?

A: You mean that McCormack bill? Well just because they authorized the money doesn't mean we have to ask for it if we don't want to. That bill was one of these Mike McCormack things where you put a lot of baloney on a piece of paper and expect it to translate into breakthroughs. That bill was useless. It didn't add a thing to our knowledge.

Currency Rates

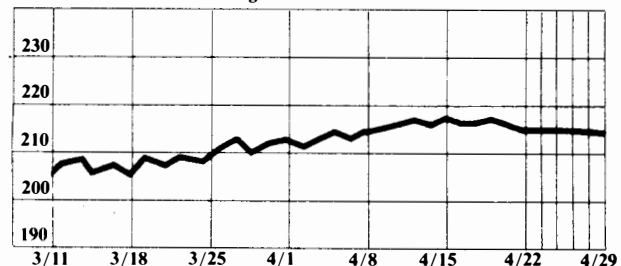
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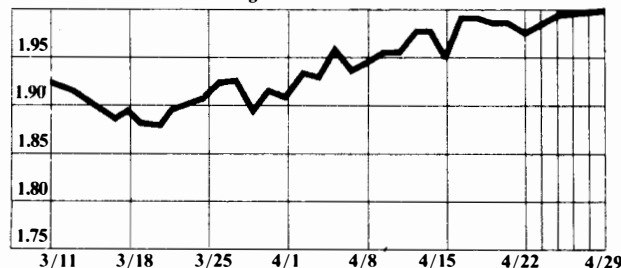
The dollar in yen

New York late afternoon fixing



The dollar in Swiss francs

New York late afternoon fixing



The British pound in dollars

New York late afternoon fixing

