

Chapter 14

National Academy of Sciences

At the end of my academic career I spent ten years as a consultant to the National Academy of Sciences/National Research Council (NAS). The NAS is under contract with the federal government to review post-doctoral proposals by newly minted Ph.D.s to conduct research at the many national laboratories. The idea is that if the NAS rates these proposals, high and equitable standards can be maintained. This prevents any lab from lowering its standards to attract more post-docs. Some national labs, such as Argonne, Brookhaven, Oak Ridge and Los Alamos run their own screening process. My first surprise was how many national laboratories devoted to energy research there are (17), in addition to laboratories involved in other areas of science.

The NAS was established in 1863 by Abraham Lincoln to provide independent, objective advise to the nation on matters related to science and technology. There were several advisory panels, including biological, geological, and medical research, in addition to mine on engineering, mathematics, and computer science. The first several years I served simply as a panel member. About half way through my term I served as co-chair with a colleague from the University of Michigan. The final years I was chair of the panel.

The primary reason I served on the NAS review panel was to keep up with the “cutting edge” of research in my field. Many of the proposals we reviewed were excellent. We had to grade them on a 1-10 scale. Each proposal was read by three



referees. Any final grade of seven or below usually did not get funded. It was remarkable how consistent the grading was. Whenever any two grades differed by two or more points, the referees involved were summoned to a conference room to work out a compromise grade on which they would both agree. The slight embarrassment produced by this rule never resulted in a lasting disagreement on a final grade.



The schedule for our panel meetings was as follows: March at the NAS headquarters in Washington (the big one), June at the NAS compound in Woods Hole, MA, September at the NAS conference center in Irvine, CA, and a winter meeting which was free floating. The winter meeting took place in Tucson, New Orleans, and San Antonio among others. The big meeting was in Washington with a full panel of thirty or more referees, mainly professors or professors emeritus. This meeting usually took two full days and involved reading hundreds of proposals. If there were too many proposals for two days, the NAS would mail several to each panel member to read before the meeting. The summer, fall, and winter meetings generally involved a much smaller number of proposals and could be accomplished in one day.

In the early years of my appointment Joyce was still teaching. So I traveled alone. In later years she was retired, and she came along “for the ride”. This meant many museums tours, art galleries, and zoos. The NAS paid for my transportation, room, and board, and I paid for hers. The panel members all served as volunteers.

The Beckman Center is also part of the University of California-Irvine. Our meetings usually began with a cocktail hour followed by a nice dinner. We especially enjoyed the summer meetings in Woods Hole where the meeting always concluded





Protesters in Washington

with a lobster dinner - as many as you could eat. Since they were huge, I usually could eat only one.

Another reason we enjoyed Woods Hole was the nautical aspect of the place. It is the home for the Oceanographic Institution as well as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The fine harbors are home to many sailboats as well as ocean going vessels. On one of our visits there we met the Bluemels who were vacationing on Cape Cod, and we all took the ferry to Nantucket Island. We also did a lot of hiking around Woods Hole. We hiked to the Nobska light house and all around Eel Pond. One of our fondest memories was finding a restaurant in Woods Hole which served two lobsters for five dollars. The only problem was the weather. After days of rain and cold we were in-

formed that summer in Woods Hole consists of just two months - July and August. Unfortunately we were there in June!

A final memory which really sticks in my mind took place on the grounds of the Washington monument. The Iraq War was about to start, and thousands of protesters were surrounding the monument. We went as innocent observers, but when we met several Unitarians carrying signs we got to know them and began carrying signs too. I later told my NAS boss, "Do we live in a great country, or what! They pay our way to come and protest!" He was amused but cautioned us to not broadcast this too far.

I apologize for not using my own slides for these pictures. I have yet to locate and scan them. Until I do, these web photos must suffice.