



PROFILE: BART GORDON

New Chair of House Science Panel Takes Extreme Route to Moderation

Representative Bart Gordon (D–TN) thinks of himself as a moderate Democrat. “On fiscal matters, I’m conservative, and on personal liberties, I’m more liberal,” says the incoming chairman of the House Science Committee, which he is already touting as a user-friendly panel “of good ideas and consensus.”

But the word moderate hardly describes his fiercely competitive nature, or how the 59-year-old lawyer, born and raised in the Middle Tennessee district that he has represented for 22 years, lives and breathes politics. Those traits, along with his close ties to Representative Nancy Pelosi (D–CA), the new House Speaker, and her promise to make innovation a centerpiece of the Democratic agenda, could elevate the status of the traditionally low-profile panel and make Gordon a significant player in the 110th Congress that opened for business this week.

If that happens, it won’t catch Gordon by surprise. He first sketched out his political future as a high school senior in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, while working on the political campaign of a family friend, and the blueprint hasn’t changed in 40 years. “I decided then and there to go into public service. And as the son of a farmer and schoolteacher, I felt that Congress was probably the highest office I could achieve with just hard work and some degree of certainty. And so I spent the next 18 years preparing to do that.” His 80-year-old mother, Margaret Gordon, recalls that her son “didn’t have time for

hobbies” as a child. “He’s so focused it’s pathetic,” she jokes.

How focused is Bart Gordon? He admits that he didn’t marry until his 50s because of the demands of his job. When Gordon decided to compete in an annual 5k charity race that pits politicians against the Washington media who cover them, he asked the nationally recognized track coach at his alma mater, Middle Tennessee State University, for advice on his workouts. It worked: Gordon holds the unofficial title of “fastest member of Congress.”

Going at less than full speed just isn’t in his nature. Asked whether he ever thought of taking a more relaxed approach to life, and to his service in Congress, Gordon shakes his head. “This is a fast track. ... I would want to excel in whatever I do. It’s just not any fun to be in the middle of the pack.”

Thanks to Democratic electoral victories in November, Gordon will have the chance to lead a panel that oversees the lion’s share of the government’s nonmedical civilian research activities. His to-do list comes from the mainstream of his party—strengthen U.S. competitiveness, develop greener sources of energy, improve science and math education, and keep a close eye on the Bush Administration’s management of the federal research enterprise. But his legislative strategy is so straightforward that it comes across as radical. “To me, a good idea is a good idea,” he says. “Rather than taking

Wedded to Congress. Bart Gordon delayed marriage and family until his 50s to pursue a career in public service.

5 or 6 years to put together a massive piece of legislation like a telecommunications or an energy bill, I think we should try to develop a consensus on the good idea and move ahead with it.”

For Gordon, moving ahead on a good idea meant making a bid for Al Gore’s House seat in 1984 when Gore decided to run for the Senate. Since then, Gordon has been reelected 11 times, usually by comfortable margins, despite an increasingly suburban district that tends to vote Republican. “He’s pretty well convinced his potential opponents, and the Republicans, that they should do their mining somewhere else,” says longtime friend and political confidant Andy Womack, a State Farm insurance agent in Murfreesboro.

Although Gordon says he has no ambitions for higher (read governor or senator) office, that doesn’t mean he lacks a global vision. However, ask him whether the United States can hold its own against the growing technological prowess of China and India, and his answer couldn’t be closer to home. “I’ve got a 5-year-old daughter who I really believe could be part of the first generation of Americans who could inherit a standard of living lower than their parents,” he says, as his throat catches and a tear forms in the corner of his eye. “That’s a complete reversal of the American dream.”

In the midst of moving both his personal and science committee staffs on Capitol Hill last month, Gordon spoke with *Science* about his political philosophy, science, and his plans for the committee. Here are excerpts from that interview.

On passing an innovation bill

“I realized that we have some jurisdictional problems over here in the House. So what I told Senator [Lamar] Alexander (R–TN) is that they should get their bill out as quickly as possible. And then rather than have a parallel bill, we’ll come out with a bill that falls within our [narrower] jurisdiction. Then in conference we can put the two bills together. Yes, Humpty Dumpty can be put back together again. I’d rather do that than to slow this thing down by 2 or 3 years by trying to pass exactly parallel bills in each house.”

On working with appropriators

“I don’t think there has been adequate communication between authorizers and appropriators. After 22 years, I think I

have pretty good relations with both Democrats and Republicans. The appropriators have the dilemma of unlimited wants and limited amounts of money. But I think we can sit down and talk about priorities. In fact, I think it would be interesting to have some joint hearings. It needs to be a collaborative effort. Now, that doesn't mean you get everything you want. But it does mean that you agree to make the best out of limited resources.

"You have to do more than just say, 'We need more money,' or that 'the National Science Foundation needs to be doubled'—I'd like 5 years, but 7 years is probably more realistic. We have to sit down and do some give and take. Within the NASA budget, I suspect that whatever we do, there won't be adequate funds to do everything that NASA has been charged with doing."

On legislative oversight

"I think that the science committee, and Congress as a whole, has acquiesced in its oversight responsibilities. And I think that if somebody is not looking over your shoulder, you become cavalier. I saw it happen to the Democrats [when they controlled Congress prior to 1995]. If you recall, the science com-

prejudging its findings. I think that will be less likely to occur if somebody is looking over their shoulder. My purpose is not to embarrass someone about their prior activity, but rather to make it clear that from now on we will be providing oversight, so don't do it anymore."

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—Bart Gordon

On a new agency for energy research

"I think we should follow the DARPA [Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency] model, so there would be fewer strings. Plus, the idea of an ARPA-E [Advanced Research Projects Agency, Energy] would be to have a better focus. You can't do a hundred things. We're hoping to find the best seven or eight approaches to renewable energy, and then focus on them. Bring together the national labs, the public and private sectors, to focus on the problem.

house.' So you need to apply a little bit of a filter to what they say. But I find that in the scientific community, there really aren't monetary drivers as much as passions that people have."

On global competition

"There are seven billion people in the world, and half of them make less than \$2 a day. We can't compete against \$2-a-day labor, and we wouldn't want to. But now India and China and other countries are also investing in R&D and starting to combine their cheap labor with innovation. So in order to maintain our standard of living, we have to increase our productivity even more.

"We want to develop the technology to be first to market, time and again. But we also need a workforce that can work at a high skill level, and not just based on recruiting the one in a hundred students who wants to be a scientist."

On the Administration's scientific team

"I think NASA Administrator [Michael] Griffin is certainly one [of the most impressive]. Partly because who he followed [Sean O'Keefe], and partly because he is both knowledgeable and candid. We don't always



mittee, under the Republicans, did away with the oversight committee, which was our only vehicle for those investigations. At the same time, I sincerely think that the Republicans were stifling some scientific conclusions and looking to staff committees with people who would go along with those conclusions and discourage any opposition.

"I think accountability is important, to save taxpayer dollars and get the most out of government programs. I also think, quite frankly, that we need to do a better job of reviewing whether or not the Administration is cooking the books with science, and

And I think that the Department of Energy needs a little encouragement to get that done. ... I've talked with [Energy] Secretary [Samuel] Bodman. And his reaction is status quo. But status quo isn't getting the job done."

On sources of advice

"The science committee has a long-tenured, well-credentialed staff, and I feel very comfortable with their advice. ... I'm also frequently meeting with associations and university presidents. Of course, as my grandfather used to say, 'The most important road in the county is the one in front of your

agree, but you know you'll get a honest, from-the-gut assessment. We don't always get that.

"Having said that, however, I think that this is a top-down Administration, and there's a lot of pressure from the top down to make the conclusions match the preconceived notions of the Administration. ... I think that [presidential science adviser John] Marburger would say that he hasn't been constrained. But I think we need to look into that more. I think he's an honorable and capable man. But he's under a lot of pressure, too."

—JEFFREY MERVIS