

# Elmer Bobst, Nixon Backer, Screened NIH Job-Seekers

By Morton Mintz

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A close personal friend and financial backer of President Nixon says that he conducted screening interviews of candidates for two top government health posts, although he didn't interview those ultimately chosen for the jobs.

Elmer H. Bobst, sometimes referred to as the President's "honorary father," told The Washington Post that he conducted the interviews with the approval of persons "deputized by the White House" and with the knowledge of Mr. Nixon.

"I wouldn't do anything at all unless I was invited to do it," Bobst said.

"The President knows I'm interested in doing anything that's good," Bobst continued. Mr. Nixon also knows that "I seek no personal gain," advise "without prejudice," "tell the truth" and exert no "improper influence," he told a reporter.

Campaign financing records list Bobst for contributions of \$84,000 to Mr. Nixon's re-election drive. An alert and vigorous 88, he was interviewed by phone in the New York City offices of Warner-Lambert Pharmaceutical, in which he is the largest single stockholder.

Although his title in the company is honorary chairman, Bobst went out of his way to emphasize that he remains as active as he was when he resigned as chairman in 1967. He still heads the firm's policy committee. "My interest has not waned at all," he said.

Bobst said he interviewed Dr. Theodore Cooper, director of the National Heart and Lung Institute, as a possible successor to Dr. Robert Marston as director of the National Institutes of Health.

However, Bobst did not interview Dr. Robert S. Stone, whose appointment as director of NIH is expected to be announced momentarily. Neither did he interview Dr. John J. Burns, a pharmaceutical research executive, as has been reported elsewhere.

Without naming anyone else, Bobst said he had interviewed a few other persons for possible consideration as director of NIH and as commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration.

The President "is holding me to a considerable extent responsible for proper development" of NIH research programs, Bobst said, noting that he has been actively involved in one health field or another for 70 years.

Bobst appeared to mean that he wants to see leadership at NIH that will control research rather than be controlled by researchers who seek financial support.

NIH should "act as a good business would act," he said.

Bobst hinted that those who authorized him to do the interviewing included Dr. Charles C. Edwards, the former FDA commissioner who is now Assistant Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare for Medical and Scientific Affairs.

Edwards, however, said that he "absolutely" had no role in such interviewing and that Bobst "acted on his own, so far as I know."

In any event, Bobst and Edwards agreed that the future FDA commissioner, Dr. Alexander Schmidt, has not been interviewed by Bobst. Schmidt is dean of the University of Illinois School of Medicine in Chicago. His appointment is

expected to be announced shortly.

Bobst complained that the FDA has been "quite muddled" in its handling of applications to market new medicines and releases new products too slowly.

"Those who are interested, including those responsible in the White House, are trying to change things," he added.

Bobst said he wants to see as commissioner someone who will accelerate marketing of new drugs because delays come "at a very high cost to the pharmaceutical industry, up to \$10 million" in some cases.

"There has to be greater speed, there has to be decisions made," Bobst said.

Last February, Edwards flatly rejected charges that the FDA was frustrating drug development and depriving Americans of important new safe and effective medicines available in other countries.

"We believe the benefits which accrue to our society because of our regulatory system are worth the cost and far outweigh any risks," Edwards told a hearing conducted by Sen. Gaylord Nelson (D-Wis.).

A top aide went on to give the Senate Monopoly Subcommittee a detailed account of Medical disasters in other countries with drugs kept off the market in the United States.

Bobst, in the interview, said his goal at the FDA and NIH is to see "competence" in leadership, rather than a continuation of "five layers of bureaucracy" permeated by persons who have an antipathy to successful businesses and who become hard to control.

However, Bobst credited Edwards with "considerable competence." He also remarked that his company grossed \$1.5 billion last year.

Dr. Cooper, of the Heart and Lung Institute, told a reporter that Bobst invited him to come to his home in Palm Beach, Fla., last January. In accepting the invitation, Cooper said, he was aware of

Bobst's close relationship with the Nixon family.

At the time, Cooper recalled, he did not consider himself a candidate for the NIH directorship. But Bobst did, as became clear during a five-hour interview, Cooper said.

The heart specialist found Bobst, who was trained as a pharmacist and who once wrote a manual for the use of injectable digitalis, "very well prepared" to discuss cardiovascular research. "He was very hospitable" and "very engaging," Cooper said.

Bobst's primary health interest is cancer research. He has been a leader of the American Cancer Society since 1945 and will be honored for his work with it on June 5, when he will receive the Sloan Award. He also is a member of the National Cancer Advisory Board, which President Nixon set up to watch his conquest-of-cancer program.