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On the Astin Dismissal

CERTAIN ASPECTS of the official dismissal of Allen V. Astin from his post as Director of the Bureau of Standards have confused and dismayed the scientists of this country, and have raised serious issues. From the published statements there is reason to fear that considerations have entered other than those of scientific and administrative competence. Great concern has been evinced over the possibility that scientific objectivity has been subjected to political interference.

Science and government have become so thoroughly intermixed in the past 15 years that it is hard to know where the one begins and the other leaves off. How to manage this marriage of necessity has become of concern recently to many thoughtful men. Reasoned consideration of these problems has not been aided by the abrupt action taken by Secretary Weeks. The National Bureau of Standards, center of much basic research as well as military and atomic development, has long served as consultant and advisor to other Government agencies on technical matters within its purview. In this capacity it tested a commercial preparation, AD-X2, allegedly effective in prolonging the life of storage batteries. The Bureau found the preparation without practical effectiveness and so reported. Other Government agencies acted on these findings and took steps which the manufacturer regarded as prejudicial and damaging to his interests.

His protests led the Senate Small Business Committee to request an independent study by M.I.T. The M.I.T. tests, reported to the Senate Committee, showed some effect of AD-X2 on batteries under laboratory conditions, but no conclusions were drawn regarding the practical effectiveness of the material. Their results were interpreted, however, by Keith J. Laidler, a consultant to the Committee, as contradicting the N.B.S. conclusions.

The technical controversy thus precipitated is hardly novel. Extrapolation from laboratory tests to field conditions is notoriously beset with pitfalls, and tests conducted in different laboratories by different procedures often disagree. Given the desire, such controversies can nearly always be resolved by new tests under mutually agreed laboratory or field conditions. What is novel, at least in the United States, is to have a high Government

official step into a technical disagreement and seek to resolve it by dismissal of the director of the Government laboratory involved. Particularly novel—and alarming—is the official's justification of his action, at least in part, on the ground that the director of the laboratory had not given sufficient attention to the "play of the market place." In the marriage of science and government, few scientists would assert that science must be the dominant controlling partner. But even fewer will accept dominance and control by government officials over objective investigation and its results. It is hard to see how confidence and good working relations can be restored unless the Astin dismissal promptly has the fullest and most impartial public investigation.

It is clearly of importance to our country and to science that the directorship of our national physical laboratory be a post which will attract scientific leadership of the highest type. To help assure this is the clear duty of the great national organizations of science. In such situations, it is seldom that the most effective approach is through public charges or formal protests. In the present situation several of the great national scientific organizations have in fact been active. In particular, the membership of the AAAS should know that its present ranking officer, the Chairman of its Board of Directors, has had several conferences in Washington, including an extended talk with the Secretary of Commerce. The Association officers are also in the closest touch with the other groups concerned with this problem.

Although some damage has been done which cannot be undone, nevertheless it seems reasonably clear that understandings now exist and that steps are being taken which will go far to avoid further trouble. In particular, the Visiting Committee to the Secretary of Commerce for the Bureau has now been asked to meet with the Secretary to discuss the efficiency of the scientific work of the Bureau; and a committee has been established to study the present situation in its general administrative aspects.

In this whole difficulty it is important to recognize that the battery additive matter can only be regarded as minor. The important issue here is the fact that the independence of the scientist in his findings has been challenged, that a gross injustice has been done, and that scientific work in the government has been placed in jeopardy.

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