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The State Department's Opportunity in Science

Five years ago the Department of State appointed a science adviser in Washington and a small number of scientists to serve as attachés in the United States embassies in several western European capitals. The positions still exist, but every one is now vacant. The science adviser left 2½ years ago, and the last science attaché came home a few weeks ago. No effort is being made to recruit successors.

Yet the program had a good start and was growing in value. The men who served as science attachés were recognized scientists. Probably most of them did not remain long enough to attain full effectiveness, although fairly rapid turnover was expected. Even so, reports of their accomplishments apparently convinced the Bureau of the Budget and the Congress that the positions should be continued, and money was appropriated for this purpose in every year since the positions were established. We understand that the range of work in the science adviser's office—which still exists even though there is no science adviser—has widened and that the volume has increased.

Responsibility for the present situation lies in the Department of State itself. Officers of the department have been considering whether the system should be continued and the form and auspices under which it could work most effectively. One possibility is to transfer the science attachés to the Central Intelligence Agency. This was the recommendation of the Hoover Commission. Transfer of science attachés to that agency would mean a complete shift of function to straight intelligence collection and away from advisory services in the conduct of foreign relations. In sharp contrast with many excellent recommendations of the Hoover Commission, this one seems to us to be completely wrong and probably to arise from a misrepresentation of the attachés' functions.

As originally planned, the science attachés were expected to facilitate the flow of scientific information, to serve as official scientific representatives of the United States, and to advise the Department of State and the embassies on matters that affect foreign relations. While the facilitation of the flow of information may appeal to many scientists as the most important of these responsibilities, the main function has been advisory.

In today's world, foreign affairs are multifaceted. Questions concerning public health, sanitation, natural resources, atomic energy, aviation, engineering, or other scientific and technologic matters are involved in many of the decisions concerning treaties, international organizations, and other international arrangements. Scientific information is only one of the bases for making policy decisions, but those decisions can be better made if all of the relevant information is considered than if one important area is neglected. Whenever scientific and technologic elements are significant for foreign relations, they should be brought to the attention of the embassies and the Department of State and be weighed with political, economic, and other relevant factors.

By failing to appoint a science adviser and science attachés, the Department of State is depriving itself—and the country it represents—of one of its authorized assets.—D. W.