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A Secretary of Science

One of the current Congressional proposals for improving the organization of science in the Federal Government is to establish a Department of Science headed by a Cabinet officer. There is a long history behind the idea; the quest for some form of central scientific organization is as old as the nation, and in 1884 a Joint Commission of the House and Senate briefly considered a Department of Science. There are attractive features to the idea, but, as the long history of inaction indicates, there are also difficulties.

Departmental status would constitute a clearly apparent symbol of importance, and would center in a strong, single agency responsibility for handling the problems of policy, salary, conditions of employment, relations with Congress, and similar matters that affect scientists generally and the conditions of utilization of science. Some scientific agencies would probably welcome transfer to a Department of Science, but others, particularly the independent agencies, might feel that they had lost status by being submerged in the larger organization. Basic research would probably gain more understanding, support, and better budgetary treatment, but some applied work might suffer from diminished contact with the agencies now served. Some skeptics also anticipate greater fiscal vulnerability in years when science is less popular than it is now, and therefore prefer the present system in which research budgets in agriculture, defense, and other fields are separately defended by the responsible departments.

There is some argument that a Department of Science would be an anomaly. The typical government department deals with a more or less homogeneous set of operating responsibilities—to defend the nation, to handle international relations, to foster agriculture; science is not a set of operating responsibilities but a means to the proper discharge of those responsibilities, and it should therefore be integrally represented in other departments instead of concentrated in a department of its own. Supporters reply that a Department of Science can work effectively with other departments and cite as proof the successful record of the British Department of Scientific and Industrial Research.

While debating the merits of one proposal, it may be well to consider other possibilities. Because science is an important aspect of the work of many departments, it might be desirable to have in each a technically qualified Assistant Secretary for Science, as Paul D. Foote is in the Department of Defense, or a Science Adviser, as Wallace R. Brode is in the Department of State. These officers would direct the scientific activities of their departments and would provide technical competence in the top echelons of many departments. Collectively, they might provide a more effective administrative organization than could a single Secretary of Science, and they would almost certainly escape some of the political problems that would beset a single secretary.

One reason for the current interest is the growing conviction that the President needs effective and continuous advice on scientific matters. A Secretary of Science could provide that advice, but he is not the only possible source. An alternative method would be through enhancement of the advisory functions of the National Science Foundation. The appointment of James R. Killian as an adviser to the President represents another means. A third possibility would be the establishment of a Council of Scientific Advisers, similar in function to the President's Council of Economic Advisers.

More attention is likely to be given to the administrative organization of science this year than at any time since the end of Congressional debates on a National Science Foundation. This is well, for the problem of how best to administer the growing and ramified Federal scientific responsibilities deserves the best solution we can devise.—D.W.