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Straitjacket

"Few would disagree about the necessity for reform in our security system." It was thus that we began our comments on the proposals of the President's Commission on Security last summer [*Science* 126, 149 (26 July 1957)], and the statement still holds: no action has been taken, no reforms instituted. The issues of security and secrecy have, however, been kept alive by the House Subcommittee on Government Information, which has held several hearings to gather testimony from scientists as well as from present and former Government administrators about barriers to the flow of scientific knowledge. A convenient summary of the hearings and the recommendations of the subcommittee has recently been published under the title "Availability of Information from Federal Departments and Agencies (Scientific Information and National Defense)."

From this report it is clear that the scientists who testified were in agreement on all major points. They were unanimous in condemning multiple clearance as wasteful and ineffective. Each of the Armed Services as well as the Atomic Energy Commission has its own criteria for clearance, and someone who has been cleared by one agency cannot communicate readily with someone who has been cleared by another agency unless he gets clearance from the second agency. The demand for multiple clearance obviously delays the exchange of information between laboratories; it discourages, when it does not completely inhibit, the free discussion of ideas, which scientists generally consider to be an important stimulus to scientific advance; it leads inevitably to duplication of research, for people in one agency may not know what has been done in another.

Another inhibition to the exchange of scientific information is the practice, which is a matter of custom rather than law, subsumed under the rubric "need-to-know." Even a person with appropriate clearance must show a "need-to-know" about the results discovered in another project before he will be given those results. The scientists pointed out that it is difficult for anyone to show a "need-to-know" when he does not know precisely what it is that he might need to know.

The scientists who testified agreed that secrecy was justified in research about weapon applications, but not in basic research. In support of the latter position, they emphasized that nature can answer questions put in any language and that the laws of nature cannot be kept secret: these laws can be discovered in one country as readily as in another. Secrecy in this realm is, they thought, self-defeating.

Although the subcommittee has dealt with other questions, among them the problems of classification and declassification of documents, it has confined its recommendations to the matters discussed above. It recommends the establishment of a system of uniform security clearance, the abolition of the "need-to-know" criterion for scientists who have been cleared, and the cessation of attempts to "hide discoveries of the basic laws of nature made in the past, present, or future."

These are sensible recommendations. If they could be translated into law, science in the Government would be freed from what the subcommittee calls the "straitjacket of excessive secrecy."—G. DuS.