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Space Is Money

Among the problems facing the present effort to set up a government agency to direct a civilian space program is the familiar one of establishing appropriate pay provisions. The administration bill, which was submitted by President Eisenhower on 2 April, and the House bill, which was approved on 1 June—the House taking less time than the Senate to reach this stage in the legislative process—agree on the point that the 43-year old National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics should serve as the nucleus for a National Aeronautics and Space Administration. The two bills disagree, however, about the provisions that should be included in the space act to enable the new agency to recruit and hold scientists of the desired talent.

A problem of enlisting scientists in certain fields for government research arises because the salary levels allowed by civil-service classifications are not always competitive with those that private companies are prepared to pay. In the past one solution, for certain agencies, has been to provide by law a certain number of scientific positions at somewhat higher levels of pay. A second solution, which is less straightforward but which has produced considerably higher salary levels, has been to put scientific personnel on the payroll of private corporations expressly created to evade the civil-service limitations.

In facing the problem of salaries for the staff of the space agency, the administration bill takes an approach which could produce salaries considerably above those of the civil-service scale. It would exempt the agency from civil-service limitations, authorizing it, in the President's words, "to fix the compensation of its employees at rates reasonably competitive with those paid by other employers for comparable work." The House bill recognizes the need for some kind of differential in salary level favorable to the space agency, but on a more modest scale. It would authorize up to 250 scientific positions paying \$19,000 a year, and up to 10 more positions paying \$21,000. At the time the House bill was voted, the maximum pay for comparable scientific positions in other agencies was \$19,000, with NACA, for example, limited to 30 positions.

Unfortunately, any provision that favors one scientific agency at the expense of another creates fresh difficulties—the greater the imbalance the greater the difficulties. One difficulty is that the Government, in employing scientists, is to a large extent competing with itself. Agencies compete both with other agencies and with private companies holding cost-plus contracts with the Government. The result may be a pay spiral, which is unfortunate for taxpayers if not for the scientists immediately involved. Another difficulty is the possible adverse effect on the morale of those scientists who are not so fortunate as to belong to the favored group.

However, in the short run these difficulties as they bear on the space agency do not carry much weight, and the short run in this case may be the overriding consideration. The problem of trying to keep an unsatisfactory pay system from getting more unsatisfactory may be of less importance than that of providing the new agency with a staff that can produce a vigorous and creative research program. In fact, things being what they are, the degree of favoritism incorporated in the final version of the space bill will be one measure of the importance that Congress attaches to the scientific investigation of outer space.—J.T.