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Federation in Moderation

A Department of Science and Technology that would develop support for neglected areas of research but that would not disturb areas of research now being successfully pursued has been urged publicly on several occasions by Lloyd V. Berkner, president of Associated Universities, Inc. The scientific community, in general, has opposed a cabinet-level administration for science, in part because of the fear that the attempt to straighten out organization lines might seriously disrupt current scientific activities. By seeking ways of gaining leadership in scientific areas where other nations now surpass us, rather than stressing organizational elegance, Berkner attempts to meet this objection.

One aim of the proposed department—and it seems to us that in the long run this aim would prove to be the most important one—is to bring into focus government responsibility for developing certain new scientific areas of importance to the nation. The new areas would be those that employ expensive equipment, that require a coordinated effort by many people, and that do not fit readily into existing agencies. The 10-year program in oceanography recently proposed by a committee of the National Academy of Sciences–National Research Council might be developed by a division of the new department. Administrative arrangements for the new activities would be made, at least in part, through national laboratories—that is, laboratories supported but not operated by government agencies. Brookhaven National Laboratory, which is supported by the Atomic Energy Commission but operated by Associated Universities, Inc., might be taken as a model.

A second aim of the proposed move is to bring under central direction existing agencies that because of present organizational difficulties are not discharging their responsibilities with desirable vigor. Lack of full development of a field of research might occur because a bureau has no special relation to the task of the department in which it is located and thus finds it difficult to attract supporting funds. Development of a field of research might also be hampered because related scientific activities are divided among several departments. According to Berkner, the existing agencies that might with profit be brought into the proposed department include the Coast and Geodetic Survey, the Hydrographic Office, the Geological Survey, the Weather Bureau, and the National Bureau of Standards.

Although some present scientific agencies in the Government would be transferred to the proposed department, other agencies would not be disturbed. A research and development program that is closely related to the task of the department in which it is located would not be transferred. The Department of Defense, for example, would keep its Office of Defense Research and Engineering. And independent agencies that are of good size and of specialized function would not be transferred since they might deflect attention from the new activities that the proposed department is designed to develop. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, for example, would retain its independence.

Although there may still be room for disagreement about the inclusion in the proposed department of this or that scientific activity, or even about creating a new department, many observers probably will laud the effort to devise a plan that by and large attempts to supplement rather than supplant present administrative arrangements. And observers who have opposed previous plans for a Department of Science and Technology probably will agree that new proposals should be considered on their own merits.—J.T.