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Capital Gain

Last month President Eisenhower approved a report setting forth a comprehensive plan for greatly increasing the federal investment in high-energy nuclear research. The report recommends that government funds for the construction and operation of accelerators be increased from $59 million for fiscal year 1959 to $135 million for fiscal year 1963, with the Atomic Energy Commission, the Department of Defense, and the National Science Foundation as the principal agencies involved. The report was prepared by a special panel appointed by the President's Science Advisory Committee and the General Advisory Committee to the Atomic Energy Commission. Increased investment in nuclear research is most welcome, and our only regret is that approval for such a plan did not come earlier.

If this country is to continue to advance in nuclear research, considerable federal support is necessary, for the cost of modern equipment is too great to be borne by universities or businesses. Indeed, the cost is so great that decisions in the Government concerning its support must be made at the White House level. The report, itself an example of planning at this level, calls for the establishment of an interdepartmental council on high-energy accelerators to continue the panel's work. The council will include policy-level representatives from the Atomic Energy Commission, the Defense Department, and the National Science Foundation. These agencies will continue to be individually responsible for the different research projects, but the council will coordinate their efforts and review new research proposals, including proposals for new accelerators.

Besides coordinating the activities of the agencies doing accelerator physics, the interdepartmental council will be a friend at court helping justify the costs. Until recently the only unit in the administration for reviewing the country's science effort as a whole was one located some distance from this effort: the Bureau of the Budget. Early this year the Federal Council for Science and Technology was established to coordinate the scientific activities of government agencies, and the new council on accelerators presumably will function as a kind of subcommittee of the Federal Council. Advice to budget makers about nuclear research is necessary because in the press of meeting more immediate and obvious demands it is easy to forget that investment in basic research offers a large return to the country, even if that return is on a long-term basis and even if its specific form is unpredictable.

With several federal agencies interested in nuclear research, questions will arise about which agencies should finance which facilities. The report recommends the construction of a linear accelerator at Stanford University, to cost well over $100 million and to operate eventually at 45 billion electron volts, and it hints that the Defense Department is the appropriate agency in this case. However, as matters now stand, and as stated by President Eisenhower at the recent symposium on basic research at the Rockefeller Institute, the Atomic Energy Commission will be the agency to ask Congress for authorization to finance the accelerator. Any agency doing applied research can benefit from basic research projects, but from the viewpoint of the country as a whole the special security requirements of the Defense Department do not make it the best place for such projects. We take the new assignment of responsibility for the Stanford accelerator as a good sign that the Defense Department's share in nuclear research will be a modest one.—J.T.