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Unsettling Side to Settling Technical Issues

Several recent disputes between Congress and the Administration over appropriations for research and weapons pose again the question of how successful our government is at bringing objective judgment to bear on technical issues. One dispute between Congress and the Administration is over the direction of the nuclear-powered aircraft program. Some members of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy want funds increased and a big effort made now to get a plane in the air, while the Administration wants to limit the program to further research on the power plant. The word *limited* is perhaps not quite right, for, although apparently no power plant has yet been demonstrated, almost a billion dollars has been spent on the project in the past 13 years.

Members of the Congressional committee have argued for early flight, that is, flight in the next four or five years, on the grounds that this effort would answer technical questions that the designers of later models would also have to face. And committee members have emphasized the propaganda value of having a nuclear-powered aircraft before the Soviets do. The Administration's position is that to begin construction of a fuselage and power plant before further research on the power plant would result in a plane of such poor performance that it would be nothing to boast about and would be of no military use.

Another dispute between Congress and the Administration involving technical matters is over the relative merits of the Air Force's Bomarc missile, the Army's Nike-Hercules, and the Army's Nike-Zeus. The Bomarc is designed for area defense, while the Nike-Hercules is designed for point, or last-ditch, defense. Both weapons are for use only against piloted aircraft, while the Nike-Zeus is for defense against ballistic missiles. Besides differing in use, the weapons also differ in their state of development, with the Nike-Hercules the most proven weapon. In sending the defense money bill to the Senate, the House cut drastically the Administration's recommendation for the Bomarc program, left the Nike-Hercules program unchanged, and added substantially to the Nike-Zeus program.

How do Congress and the Administration compare in their efforts at deciding technical issues? Many observers find that when Congress attempts to decide technical matters, it is more likely to do so on the basis of political and financial factors than on scientific or military ones. Indeed, President Eisenhower made this point recently when replying to a reporter's question concerning his having spoken sharply to several Senators about what the President was quoted as calling a "munitions lobby." Of course, Congress can fill important functions. By challenging appropriations, for example, it can force the Administration to make decisions that the Administration has so far failed to make. Congressional action on the various missile programs resulted in the Pentagon's deciding questions of air defense, including such matters as the proper mix of the weapons, in its efforts to push its program in the Senate.

When the Administration does decide technical matters, so many observers find, it does have a good chance of deciding them on an objective basis. The Administration's decision in this year's budget message to support further research on the power plant before attempting to fly a nuclear-powered aircraft is based in part on the judgment of the President's Science Advisory Committee. However, the Administration can also be subjected to pressure from political groups, the armed services, and companies in the defense business. At the insistence of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, the nuclear-powered aircraft program has again been brought under review. It will be instructive to see whether the Administration's position changes, and, if so, what its reasons are.—J.T.