

Science in the News

Atoms for Peace: An American Victory of Uncertain Value Is Won at the Vienna IAEA Conference

The United States position on the necessity for safeguards and controls on fissionable material distributed through the International Atomic Energy Agency was upheld at Vienna last week, but the proposal had to be pushed through over the objections of India and five other neutral Asian nations as well as those of the Soviet bloc.

The issue was not a new one. President Eisenhower had spoken of a need for safeguards when he made the atoms-for-peace proposal which led to the establishment of the IAEA. Three years later, the original agreement setting up the agency spoke of a system of safeguards to make sure, or at least reasonably sure, that fissionable material distributed through the agency would not be used for military purposes. But a detailed operating plan for the safeguards took several years for an agency committee to work out, and a safeguards system was never put into operation in the IAEA.

As a result, the agency has never assumed what was to be its primary function of distributing nuclear material. The United States, instead, has bypassed the agency and worked through bilateral agreements with the various countries which have included arrangements for safeguards whenever fissionable quantities of radioactive materials have been involved. This year, though, a draft proposal for safeguards procedure was ready, and the United States successfully pressed for a resolution endorsing, in general terms, its adoption. The details are to be fixed by the IAEA's permanent organization and are to be subject to changes based on technological development. The plan includes such things as audits of fissionable material, operating reports, and on-the-spot inspections.

The American move was strongly

supported by Great Britain, Japan, and a majority of the other members of the agency. It was opposed by a group of neutralists, headed by India; by the Soviet bloc; and by the Union of South Africa. The value of the American victory is uncertain, for unless the cooperation of the opposing powers can be won the safeguards system will be of little significance.

The Union of South Africa remains free to sell uranium ore directly to nations which want it, without working through the IAEA. The Soviet Union is similarly unencumbered. If these nations are willing to sell nuclear material through bilateral agreements without safeguards, then India and other nations objecting to safeguards can, of course, avoid them. Yet the central reason for the United States' taking the lead in organizing the IAEA was the hope that an effective system of international controls and inspection could be established through the agency, both to discourage the spread of atomic weapons and to make at least a beginning toward a system of general controls and inspection that might lead to some progress on the problem of arms control.

United States Position

At the time the IAEA was organized the State Department told Congress that without an international control agency "the U.S.S.R. would have a strong incentive to seek adherents through nuclear aid 'with no strings attached'—i.e., without inspections and controls. In other countries commercial suppliers would exert pressure on their government to allow them to export nuclear materials and equipment under the least onerous conditions. Thus without the IAEA the erosion of control criteria would eventually tend to place any reasonably advanced country in a position to create weapons."

The State Department also pointed out that the control sections of our bilateral agreements would be more pal-

atable to other countries if the controls reflect an internationally accepted approach rather than something imposed unilaterally by the United States. The hope was that the IAEA would assume a broker's function in facilitating and keeping track of all international exchanges of nuclear materials.

The adoption of the American resolution in Vienna last week will help on the American interest in controls: it will make controls more palatable to the countries receiving nuclear material from the United States by making the controls internationally agreed upon rather than American-imposed. We have suggested to the 50-odd nations with which the U.S. has bilateral agreements that these be transformed into arrangements working through IAEA once the international safeguards system is in operation. But the larger aim of establishing a control system with all nations working through the international agency has not been moved forward very far through the adoption of a system which a number of key nations apparently intend to circumvent. The action at Vienna was an accomplishment in principle; it may or may not have laid the basis for an accomplishment in fact in future years.

Summary of Debate

The argument of India and other neutralists was that the United States wanted to impose safeguards and controls on the smaller underdeveloped powers, while the major atomic powers, which really need to be controlled, are left free of controls. The American answer has been that you have to start with controls somewhere, and that the limited control system under the IAEA is a first step, indeed the only step toward controls that seems realistically attainable at this time. The Indians were unconvinced, though, and continued to argue that the controls are a one-sided infringement of sovereignty. The United States offered voluntarily to place four American reactors under the control system. This was only a token move, of course, since the four controlled reactors would be only a small part of American nuclear facilities. But as a gesture to show that the United States is willing to accept controls on itself as well as to impose controls on others, the move, made by Atomic Energy Chairman John McCone, strengthened the American position.

Meanwhile, the Russians enthusiastically supported the neutralists. They

repeated the arguments that the controls are one-sided, an infringement on national sovereignty, a guard over those who least need guarding, and unlikely anyway to prevent a determined nation from building an atomic bomb. The Russians, echoing the mood of Mr. Khrushchev at the United Nations, suggested that the whole control idea is another plot of the American monopolists who want inspections and safeguards so that they can steal the information developed by researchers in underdeveloped countries.

The conference, in general, was turned into a miniature of the debate at the United Nations. The Soviet bloc introduced resolutions on disarmament and the test ban. As in the past, the United States took the position that these are extraneous issues. We argued that, meritorious as the Soviet bloc resolutions might or might not be, to accept them would merely subvert the purpose of the IAEA, which is not likely to accomplish much if the Russians are allowed to turn the organization into a propaganda forum by talking about and passing resolutions on subjects which are beyond the scope of the agency.

There was more political bickering over the question of admitting Communist China to membership. The American position, in effect that Communist China should not be admitted until after it has been admitted to the U.N., was upheld, but by a smaller margin than last year.

Accomplishments of the IAEA

Sterling Cole, the former chairman of the Joint Congressional Atomic Energy Committee who has headed the IAEA since its organization, pronounced the agency's activities "modestly successful" in its first three years. He mentioned the agency's sponsorship of fellowships, international scientific conferences, and its work on international health and safety standards. He spoke of the usefulness of agency survey teams in helping underdeveloped countries work out realistic plans for using atomic energy, a part of the agency's activities for which the United States has special reason to be grateful. For the high hopes of what could be accomplished through atomic energy programs that were implicit in Eisenhower's 1953 atoms-for-peace speech, and which continued in U.S. pronouncements for two more years, have been sadly deflated. It has

been convenient that an international agency has taken the responsibility for scaling down the dreamlike expectations of atomic wonders. Otherwise this awkward task would have had to be undertaken by representatives of the American government, which contributed so enthusiastically to raising the now deflated hopes.

As things are, the realization that cheap atomic power is probably still quite a few years off has not reacted against the United States, for the over-optimism was general, and the United States is not being blamed for sharing in it and thus being led in the early years to suggest that underdeveloped nations could expect much more from the atoms-for-peace program than it has turned out to be capable of delivering. Despite the drastic reappraisal of what could be expected of atomic energy in the near future, the atoms-for-peace plan seems to be a plus for the United States, for the proposal made a fine impression on the rest of the world, even if, so far, it has never come to much.

There is a general feeling that Sterling Cole was justified in calling the IAEA, the organization developed to implement the atoms-for-peace proposal, modestly successful. It has been a useful organization, despite the tendency of its general meetings to become bogged down in futile political debate. Despite the strong reaction to the overblown hopes of the earlier '50's ("These people don't need a reactor. What they need is a plow!") there is still room for a good deal of work, particularly in the less spectacular area involving the use of radioisotopes, where, in contrast to nuclear power, the feeling is that more useful work could be done than is being done for the underdeveloped countries.

The American budget for atoms-for-peace, despite the wide publicity given the plan, is very small, although still much larger than that of any other country. It includes something over \$5 million a year for our contribution (32 percent) to the assessed budget of IAEA. But in the area of specifically American work, the lone item in this year's mutual security appropriation called for only \$3.4 million, less than 0.1 percent of our total foreign-aid appropriations. This modest figure was cut by 60 percent, to only \$1.5 million, by the House Appropriations Committee, and the State Department made no

strong effort to have the money restored by the Senate. The budget has thus dwindled to a point where it can only go up in future years, unless the program is simply dropped, something which does not seem likely.

Patent Medicines: A Modest Drive Is Underway to Educate the Public

Last week the American Medical Association began work on an effort to educate the public on how much money it is wasting on worthless nonprescription medicines. The Food and Drug Administration and consumer organizations have been involved in similar educational efforts, but the public has not seemed much interested, although the value of worthless nonprescription drugs sold is usually estimated in terms of hundreds of millions of dollars per year. The AMA estimates the average spending per family at over \$200 a year on proprietary medicines, most of them harmless, but a waste of money. The point of the AMA's drive is to suggest that there are better ways to attack the problem of high medical costs than to get the federal government involved in paying for medical care.

The grosser abuses of the patent medicine business were largely eliminated years ago through government regulations. The principal issue today is the problem of what Food and Drug officials refer to as "mere economic fraud." The FDA says it does not have the budget and staff to worry about cases of mere fraud, where no real danger to health is involved. It contented itself with occasional speeches by its officials and with a few pamphlets and press releases, none of which receive anything like the circulation of the proprietary drug advertising they are intended to counteract.

The Federal Trade Commission, on the other hand, does get involved in cases of fraud, but its powers are limited. (It required nearly 20 years of litigation for the FTC to get the makers of Carter's Pills, an ordinary laxative, to stop claiming that the pills would produce wonderful effects by stimulating the flow of liver bile.) In effect, the FTC has the power to stop advertising that is clearly untrue. It cannot do anything much about advertising which, while it may be literally true, is plainly intended to mislead the public. —H.M.