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SCIENCE, now combined with THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY, is published each Friday by the American Association for the Advancement of Science at National Publishing Company, Washington, D.C. SCIENCE is indexed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*.

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C. Manuscripts should be typed with double spacing and submitted in duplicate. The AAAS assumes no responsibility for the safety of manuscripts. Opinions expressed by authors are their own and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the AAAS or the institutions with which the authors are affiliated. For detailed suggestions on the preparation of manuscripts, see *Science* 125, 16 (4 Jan. 1957).

Advertising correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, Room 1740, 11 West 42 St., New York 36, N.Y.

Change of address notification should be sent to 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C., 4 weeks in advance. Furnish an address label from a recent issue. Give both old and new addresses, including zone numbers.

Annual subscriptions: \$8.50; foreign postage, \$1.50; Canadian postage, 75¢. Single copies, 35¢. Cable address: Advancesci, Washington.

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Smooth Sailing

International scientific meetings offer an unparalleled stimulus to scientific progress; they assemble the world's most notable investigators to their mutual benefit; and they are especially stimulating to the younger scientists of the host country whose international contacts are more limited than those of their older colleagues.

Owing to our immigration laws and to their interpretation by the State Department in the past, successful international meetings have been difficult to arrange in the United States. Some foreign scientists have objected to the difficulty of obtaining visas, the extensive questionnaire that was required, the fingerprinting requirement, and their liability to be put in an ineligible category. Another difficulty has arisen from the travel restrictions imposed upon Soviet nationals, which have made it difficult to find suitable places to meet and routes by which the Russians could reach them.

But happily the last few years have seen some sharp changes in policy. Both Congress and the State Department have taken steps to ease visa difficulties, and the State Department is willing to open up restricted areas for international meetings. The change in attitude and policy became evident when Congress gave the State Department the right to waive the fingerprinting requirement in 1957. Additional small steps have been taken since. Only this spring the lengthy written questionnaire, which seemed to applicants to pry unnecessarily into their past and to be a test of their memory for their past affiliations and whereabouts in minute detail, was eliminated.

A more important change has been made in the interpretation of eligibility. The law governing immigration designates certain categories of persons as ineligible for visas, but it also provides for waiver of the provisions (except for saboteurs and espionage agents) by the Attorney General. Formerly the question of a waiver was seldom raised; now it is. The consul is more likely now to refer a case to the Department, and the Department is now more likely to ask the Attorney General to authorize a waiver. Thus a scientist who is invited to attend a meeting here or a scientist in good standing who wants to come on his own initiative will find his chances for success much better than in the recent past.

The other main difficulty that has beset international meetings in the U.S. is the imposition of travel restrictions on Soviet nationals. These restrictions were set up by the State Department in 1955 in response to the long-standing Soviet practice of closing large areas of the U.S.S.R. to foreigners. Since parts of every state and of most cities are on the restricted list, a meeting that Russians could attend was precluded unless special concessions were made. The State Department now makes such concessions for international meetings: meetings may be held in restricted areas, and Russians may visit sites connected with the official program. Restrictions on travel to and from the meetings are similarly relaxed.

The next big international meeting scheduled for the U.S. is that of the International Astronomical Union, to be held in Berkeley next August. This will put the new practices to the test. So far all preliminary arrangements have gone well, and a large international attendance, including about 100 from the Soviet Union, is expected. If the Berkeley meeting continues to enjoy smooth sailing—and there is every indication that it will—the outlook for future international meetings in the U.S. will be greatly improved—G.DuS.