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Science and the News

Hanford and Stanford: The Issue Is Clear but the Politics Are Complex

The complicated politicking that has linked a $95 million proposal to add power generating facilities to the new Hanford, Washington, plutonium reactor and the $114 million proposal to build a giant electron accelerator at Stanford University grew even more complicated last week when the House of Representatives knocked the Hanford proposal out of the Atomic Energy Commission authorization bill. The House defeat set in motion an elaborate stratagem by supporters of Hanford to save the project, and the stratagem, until nearly the last minute, involved a threat to kill the Stanford accelerator, although this move was finally abandoned.

The Hanford proposal involves building a generating plant to use the steam produced by the cooling system of the plutonium reactor. If built, it would produce 700,000 kilowatts of power, and would be the largest atomic power plant in the world. Heavy opposition developed from the private power industry, which was immensely displeased at the idea of the government's going into the production of atomic power, and from the coal industry and coal-producing areas generally, which felt that if the Hanford plant were not converted to power production, new coal-fired generating plants would be built to provide for the Northwest's power needs. One West Virginia Democrat from a coal-mining area who had a nearly perfect record of support for the Administration took the floor to dissociate himself from the arguments of the opponents of public power. He said his vote would simply reflect the fact that he was representing West Virginia, not the whole United States, and that he could not vote for a proposal that would, he feared, just put more West Virginians on the dole.

In the Pacific Northwest, on the other hand, conservative Republicans joined the Democrats in supporting the proposal, and the strongly conservative Portland *Oregonian*, after the House vote, published a bitter editorial railing at the "incredible piece of Congressional stupidity" based on "arguments as phony as a lead wedding ring."

The debate, then, was essentially over the issue of an expansion of public power, but with many departures from normal voting patterns, based on sectional interests.

Democrats on the Atomic Energy Committee hoped to save the proposal after the House defeat by restoring the Hanford authorization in conference, with the chance that the conference report might be pushed through the House. This was the tactic that enabled the Administration to get through its minimum wage bill after a preliminary defeat in the House.

A conference report is supposed to represent a compromise between rival House and Senate bills. To create at least an illusion of something that could be compromised between the House and Senate, the Democrats talked of knocking some provision out of the bill in the Senate. The conference committee, controlled by supporters of Hanford, could then arrange a "compromise" in which the House would give in on Hanford and the Senate would graciously restore whatever it had knocked out. Since the Stanford accelerator was the only project in the bill even remotely comparable in importance to Hanford, the Democrats planned to try to kill Stanford in the Senate.

This was a peculiarly transparent scheme since the same Democratic Senators who as members of the Joint Atomic Energy Committee had unanimously voted in favor of Stanford would now have to take the floor of the Senate to argue that it should be killed. But it was seriously talked about, privately of course, by leading members of the Joint Committee up until the day before the Senate vote last Tuesday, and apparently finally abandoned only when it became clear that there was no way to get a majority of the Senate to go along with it.

Last Tuesday, opponents of Hanford in the Senate, led by Hickenlooper of Iowa, fought hard to kill the Hanford project then and there by knocking it out of the Senate version, thus leaving no chance for it to be restored in conference. But after 3 hours of debate supporters of the project carried the vote by 54 to 36. This left Hanford in in the Senate version, out in the House, and with a majority in the conference

committee prepared to put it back in the final bill. But whether the House can be induced to accept such a conference report is most doubtful. Meanwhile, final authorization of the $114 million for the Stanford accelerator now had become assured.

Satellite Communications

There is a rough analogy between the problems of public versus private power that led to the Hanford controversy and the question of proper ownership of a satellite communications system. Last month the President asked the Space Council for recommendations on the "nature and diversity of ownership of a world-wide communications system," with the proviso that "public interest considerations should be given the highest priority." This request formally reopened the question of ownership. The Eisenhower Administration, in one of its last policy directives before it left office, had announced that "the government should aggressively encourage" commercial development of a satellite communications system.

The new Administration has laid great stress on the necessity for making the service available to all countries, an obvious point of conflict with the commercial interest in concentrating on the profitable, high-traffic ties between North America and Western Europe. Another potential point of conflict was brought up by the testimony of Edward R. Murrow last week before the House Science Committee. Murrow, head of the United States Information Agency, talked of the importance of the system to the information program. Satellite communications, for example, will make world-wide television broadcasting a reality, and Murrow stressed the need to see that the rates charged USIA under such a system will be low enough to permit the agency to make extensive use of the system. Murrow argued that a low rate for government agencies is well justified by the heavy public investment that is making the system possible, but there is a clear conflict here with the commercial interest in limiting the amount of low-rate government traffic in order to maximize the amount of commercial traffic that can be carried.

The problem, then, is whether the commercial companies can profitably make the heavy investments necessary to create the system, to do this as quickly as the Administration feels the national interest demands, and to do it under the handicap, for commercial investors, of having to design a system that includes a number of features, only two of which are noted above, which make no sense from a commercial point of view, but which may make very good sense from a national point of view. There is a good deal of doubt within the Administration that a commercial venture can meet these requirements. Nevertheless, for the government to announce an intention to own the system, and hence to pre-empt commercial development, would raise a controversy that would dwarf the squabble that developed over the Hanford atomic power plant.

The Space Council this week submitted its recommendations on this touchy matter to the President. A public announcement will be made sometime after the report is approved by the President. Unless major changes are made, which is unlikely, the policy to be laid down will be the politically obvious one of (i) stating a preference for private development in keeping with the traditional way of handling things in this country, (ii) stressing that the national interest remains paramount and that no proposal can be accepted that fails to meet the national interest, and (iii) stressing that speed of development is an urgent factor.

In effect, this is a policy of hedging: a real decision on the ownership of the system will have to be made fairly early in 1962. For the time being the Administration's policy will be to give the commercial companies a chance to get together and see what kind of proposal they can come up with, for even those within the Administration who are strongest in their feeling that the system will have to be developed by the government recognize that as a matter of practical politics the commercial companies cannot be shut out of the ownership arrangement until they at least have been given a chance to make a proposal.

Science Advisers

On another policy matter on which the Administration is in no rush to commit itself, a proposal of Senator Jackson's subcommittee on National Policy Machinery to reorganize the President's Science Advisory Committee (PSAC) has been greeted with discreet silence. The Jackson subcommittee's staff report suggested that there is no present need for a Department of Science, but that the PSAC ought to be removed from the President's personal staff, expanded, and formally organized as an agency roughly equivalent to the Council of Economic Advisers, which has formal responsibility for studying national economic policy. In practice, the PSAC already has equivalent responsibility for overall science policy, and the changes recommended by the Jackson subcommittee are rather technical in nature. Nevertheless, they would significantly alter the role of the PSAC.

At present the committee has no formal basis for its existence. Its budget comes out of a fund for the President's office expenses for which no accounting is made to Congress. It is merely part of the President's personal staff, and it could be disbanded at the pleasure of the President, but it has assumed an important enough role so that it is unthinkable that it should be disbanded. It is PSAC's very importance that has led to occasional congressional criticism that it is not only completely beyond the control of Congress but that, as a body whose only responsibility is to the President personally, it is completely beyond the power of Congress to even find out just what it is doing.

The Jackson committee's recommendations would shift the PSAC from the White House staff to the much larger organization known as the Executive Office of the President, and would require the appointment of two associates to the present science adviser, thus paralleling the three-man Council of Economic Advisers.

The essential argument of the Jackson committee was that the need for a high-level science policy agency is so clear that it seemed a good idea to have it formally organized and formally given its responsibilities. But the clearest effect of the recommendations would be to open up the PSAC to limited congressional surveillance, if only through the device of making the advisers appear before congressional committees to justify their budget.

As a result, the Administration has shown little interest in the proposal, for it is good administrative practice to avoid setting up a new agency until a need for a new agency has become clear. And no administration is particularly delighted with the idea of reorganizing something if the principal immediate effect will be merely to give the legislative branch more power over it.—H.M.