News and Comment

LBJ and Science: Policies Marked by Continuity, but a Few Events Suggest Developments for Future

Since President Johnson has now been in office only a little over 3 months, it would be foolish to attempt any thoroughgoing analysis of his administration's effect on the scientific community. But a number of points provide a bit of illumination and suggest some developing trends.

First of all, the federal relationship with the scientific community is so extensive and deeply rooted that nothing short of an explosive assault on the status quo could produce significant change. Johnson, who enunciated a general theme of "let us continue" when he took the reins from Kennedy, has shown no inclination to turn anything topsy-turvey in the federal establishment. This could be attributed to his ideological identity with the late President, pre-election caution, and a desire to promote a sense of stability after the shock of assassination. Conceivably, election to the White House could make the President more venturesome. But in the specific area of federal support of science, Johnson, on the basis of past and present performance, appears to be emotionally and politically dedicated to the postwar pattern of government as a permanent and increasingly generous patron of the sciences. And there is no reason to believe that election to the White House would reveal any contrary feelings. To date, his administration has not produced any significant changes in the policies or procedures of the federal agencies that supply funds for the nation's researchers. The consistent report is that things are proceeding very much as before.

As far as money for research is concerned, the Johnson budget, pared and pruned as it was for economy and political window-dressing purposes, went along with the trend of annually raising the total while reducing the rate of increase. (*Science* 24 January 1964.) The numbers can be misleading, since research and development activities are spread through virtually every federal agency, and a uniform definition of R&D is impossible to attain. But the numbers still tell a story of more money for R&D in the first Johnson budget. He inherited an R&D budget of $14.9 billion and, for the forthcoming fiscal year, raised this amount to $15.2 billion. Within these overall sums, the figures for basic research rose from $1.6 to $1.8 billion. The amounts may be disappointing to many federal agencies and the people whose work they support, but when viewed against how others fared under the Johnson budget knife, it appears that research and development came out among the favored few.

Thus, it can be argued that on substantive grounds the scientific community is neither better nor worse off for the change in the White House, but, at the same time, it is plain that Johnson's succession has produced differences in the Washington atmosphere that surrounds the federal science agencies. These are, in most respects, intangible in nature, and there is a danger that their significance can be overestimated. So far, in fact, they have had little effect on the real world, but they are worth noting, particularly for the possibilities that they suggest for future relations between science and government.

Regional Demands

Perhaps the most apparent of these differences involves the increasingly volatile issue of regionalism in the allocation of R&D funds. As was noted here on 31 January, in connection with Johnson's effort to take some of the political sting out of the decision against building a nuclear accelerator in Wisconsin, the President seems more inclined than his predecessor to honor the cries of the have-nots. But it should be stressed that it wasn't Johnson who opened the dikes. Rather, he merely seems to have indicated a willingness to go further than Kennedy in recognizing that, like it or not, reality dictates that a 15-percent slice of the federal budget cannot be isolated from the political process. But, in this respect, he actually hasn't moved much beyond Kennedy, who was no novice at extracting political dividends from the placement of federal funds. For example, the facilities of the space establishment, most of which came into being under Kennedy, are heavily concentrated below the Mason-Dixon line, which may possibly explain why some traditionally tight-fisted southern legislators are space enthusiasts.

At the moment, Johnson's franker recognition of regional interest has not visibily manifested itself in ways other than the Wisconsin accelerator decision, but an opportunity for a major demonstration is approaching with the need for decisions on two of the biggest research plums to come along in several years: NASA's Electronics Research Center, which carries a price tag of $50 million, and the Public Health Service's Environmental Health Center, listed at $33 million.

Boston Favored

Through a din of competing congressional delegations, NASA has been insisting that it would be senseless to locate the research center outside the electronics-rich Cambridge, Massachusetts, scientific complex. And, though the final decision is not yet in, the space agency has compiled an array of evidence which seems to be swinging the issue its way. Congress, stirred by charges that Cambridge was selected to help Senator Teddy Kennedy redeem his campaign pledge that he "can do more for Massachusetts," last year forbade a start until NASA presented a special study justifying the site. Not surprisingly, the study, headed by a panel of NASA executives, produced the conclusion that the original decision was sound, and it is now going to be difficult for either Congress or the administration to decide otherwise. A decision against Cambridge would suggest that Johnson is going to play the regional game for all its political worth, far beyond anything that might reasonably have been expected of Kennedy.

In the case of the PHS center, the selection process is far less crystallized, and it would not be at all difficult for

regionalism to be the governing force in selecting the site for that long-sought facility. For several years, now, it has generally been agreed that there should be such a center to concentrate research on various environmental problems such as pesticides, and air and water pollution. The go-ahead on construction has foundered, however, on the political question of where. At the time of Kennedy's death it appeared that the North Carolina research triangle had the lead, on the dual basis of scientific competence and Kennedy's need to temper Southern hostility to his civil-rights position. Paradoxically, Johnson is, if anything, even holier than Kennedy on civil rights, but as the first southerner to occupy the White House in this century, he appears to have the south in the bag and, therefore, has less reason to cultivate its votes. Consequently, North Carolina's prospects seem to have receded, and various congressional delegations are once again in hot pursuit of the prize. The PHS itself contends that no place but Beltsville, Maryland, will do, but no one except the PHS and the Maryland congressional delegation seems to be taking that claim seriously, and it is now generally felt that that Environmental Health Center is once again up for political grabs.

Homage to Science

Far more subtle and difficult to appraise than pork-barrel maneuvering, which, after all, is an old national sport, with its own literature and score-keeping techniques, is the spirit which emanates from the White House and which, in various ways, tinges all federal activities. As far as things scientific are concerned, Johnson has emulated Kennedy in publicly paying homage to science as a source of national strength. He carried through with Kennedy's plan to present personally the Fermi award to J. Robert Oppenheimer, and the words he chose on that occasion might just as well have come from Kennedy. But—and maybe it is just nostalgia that creates the impression of contrast—Kennedy made the Washington scientific community feel that he regarded science as incredibly important in the grand scheme of things, an impression which he created by evincing a sort of romantic view of science's potential combined with a lay appreciation of its complexities and limitations.

Johnson, on the other hand, has created the impression that he takes a much more down-to-earth view of science—that he feels it merits support because it is vital for national well-being. But, in contrast to Kennedy, he has not created the sense that he considers the matter as going beyond the question of utility, or that it has a great deal to do with such intangibles as the quality of American life, a national sense of adventure, or the general good that comes from honoring the pursuit of knowledge. It should be stressed that Johnson has had many more important things than relations with the scientific community to occupy his attention during his first 90 days in the White House; furthermore, he came into office during the early stages of a previously planned change in the directorship of the Office of Science and Technology. While Kennedy had been close to Jerome B. Wiesner, the outgoing OST director, as far back as preelection days, Johnson was only casually acquainted with the incoming director, Donald F. Hornig.

Economic Effects

But the contrast between Johnson and Kennedy in regard to science and technology is something that appears to go beyond acquaintanceship with advisers or the pace of the presidency. For example, in touring space facilities, Kennedy repeatedly displayed a sense of excitement about space as an adventure and its hardware as a manifestation of human genius. Johnson, on the other hand, regularly inquired, in great detail, about the local economic impact of space facilities, the number of people they employed, and the cost of construction. Too much, of course, can easily be read into these incidents, but at this early stage of Johnson's tenure they suggest—though perhaps only faintly—attitudes toward science very different in nature. Whether the difference will have any concrete impact on science remains to be seen, but as budgetary pressures grow and harder choices have to be made in supporting research, there is in this the suggestion of a possibility that the question "What good is it?" will become increasingly important.

So far, however, the Johnson administration has shown every sign of being sympathetic to the general pattern of the federal government's paying for science and leaving it pretty much alone thereafter. Major policy proposals or statements concerning science are yet to come, but one minor incident has stirred a bit of interest. In dedicating the National Geographic Society's splendid new headquarters building in Washington on 18 January, the President proposed that the Geographic Society "serve as a clearinghouse for knowledge, to bring together men of science of every land, to share and to spread their knowledge and their talents." He did not explain why the Geographic Society, which would disclaim the experience or competence required for such an endeavor, should be assigned this task when some half dozen organizations are already in the field, including, UNESCO, the International Council of Scientific Unions, the National Academy of Sciences, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The suggestion came as a surprise to the Geographic Society as well as to many others. Nothing more has been heard of it, and it is likely that it died at birth. Efforts to trace its source produced the advice that the President likes to offer a major proposal in every important speech and that one of his political speech writers thought this would be suitable. In any case, the incident is an isolated one that can be written off as a product of transitional bumpiness.

New Health Commission

It is true that, to the distress of many administrators in the health-related sciences, Johnson did come forth with a proposal for a national commission on heart disease, cancer, and strokes. But everything indicates that Kennedy intended to do the same. The proposal, contained in Johnson's 10 February health message, calls for appointing persons "prominent in medicine and public affairs" to report before the end of this year on "steps to reduce the incidence of these diseases through new knowledge and more complete utilization of the medical knowledge we already have." Just what can be accomplished in the now over-commissioned field of health activities was not explained. Nor was it explained why, when NIH is undergoing a thorough scrutiny by a panel set up by the White House, another study group should be brought into the same general area. But Kennedy was sold on the idea by one of his medically minded longtime political supporters. His advisers conceded that a study probably wouldn't hurt, and, as a result, the commission was already in the mill when Johnson succeeded to the White House.—D. S. GREENBERG