Science Goes to Lunch

The Cosmos Club of Washington is one of those institutions about which it sometimes seems that those who need to know about it already do, and nobody else has any reason to find out. In the mounting literature of science-and-government—the patient catalogs of committees, councils, and panels that are sometimes taken as descriptions of "how the system actually works"—nothing is told of what goes on at the elegant Renaissance mansion at 2121 Massachusetts Avenue, a graceful corner on one of Washington's few remaining stately boulevards. Yet the Cosmos Club is to much of American science what Paris cafés are to the existentialists, both the shell and the seed-bed of considerable professional activity. Inside its walls, on nearly every day of the year, two or three out-of-town physicists will chat over breakfast, a university president will lunch with the director of a major granting agency, or the science advisers of three executive agencies will get together for dinner. If it is not quite as single-minded as the lady taxi driver described it ("Oh yes, twenty-one twenty-one, very nice but no fun"), there is still little talk about maid service in the suburbs.

The Cosmos Club is by no means exclusively the domain of scientists. Among the founders, the remarkable scientist-explorer-conservationist John Wesley Powell and the historian Henry Adams are perhaps the best remembered. More recent members have included three Presidents (Taft, Wilson, and Hoover), distinguished representatives of every academic craft, public officials, physicians, artists, writers, and even financiers. At last count, members of the club had won 14 Nobel and 16 Pulitzer prizes, in a wide range of fields. But though it is one place in Washington where there is a modest bridge between the two cultures, ever since its founding in 1878 scientists have predominated.

From the beginning, the club was of particular service to the men who flocked to Washington after the Civil War to take advantage of expanding government-sponsored activities in fields such as geology, meteorology, astronomy, and ethnology. A place for like-minded souls to socialize in a city largely barren of intellectual institutions seemed essential, not just to assure congeniality or to advance knowledge but to prevent the divisive bickering that sometimes arose between scientists in the competition for congressional and public attention and funds.

The club, with a convenient clubhouse open all the time, a library providing books and the latest periodicals, and a kitchen serving light foods, appears to have met real needs, for it grew steadily. In 1882 the club moved from a rented downtown suite to the Dolly Madison house across Lafayette Square from the White House, where it became a notable fixture of the local landscape and where it remained until its move in 1952 to the turn-of-the-century mansion that looks like a Hollywood casting director's image of a gentlemen's club. In the interval the club had grown from 60 to over 2000 members, acquired a staff of 100 (making the transition from the era of "servants" to the era of "employees"), and developed an enterprise whose daily operating costs came to about $2300.

Although it has grown large, the Cosmos Club remains select, and getting into it requires an appraisal that falls somewhere between the Ph.D. examination and a full field clearance by the FBI. The essential requirement for membership has always been intellectual distinction, but the test of distinction has grown more formal with the passage of time. Where originally it was required only that proposed members be "interested in science, literature, or art," it is now required that they be men (*a*) "who have done meritorious original work in science, literature, or the fine arts; (*b*) who, though not professionally occupied in science, literature, or the fine arts, are well known to be cultivated in some field thereof; or (*c*) who are recognized as distinguished in a learned profession or in public service."

These provisos and other procedures are regulated by the club's by-laws, but how the test is applied in each case is in the hands of the 12-member Admissions Committee, a body which is both autonomous in its actions and silent about the accumulated customs and precedents which govern its choices. Candidates must be sponsored by two members of the club, who submit a form to the Admissions Committee describing the nominee's background, indicating what category he should be considered under, and documenting the activities, publications, or services that qualify him as "meritorious," "cultivated," or "distinguished." In addition the sponsors are expected to submit less formal letters describing the candidate's personal and social attributes and providing detailed evidence that he is not run-of-the-mill or merely competent, but actually distinguished. Sponsors are also encouraged to persuade other members of the club who know the candidate to submit such informal letters. The Admissions Committee then reviews all evidence—including any adverse letters that may have been prompted by posting of the candidate's name on the club bulletin board, and the primary publications on which his claim to distinction is based—and makes its decision, destroying its working materials as it goes along. Two negative votes are sufficient to prevent admission.

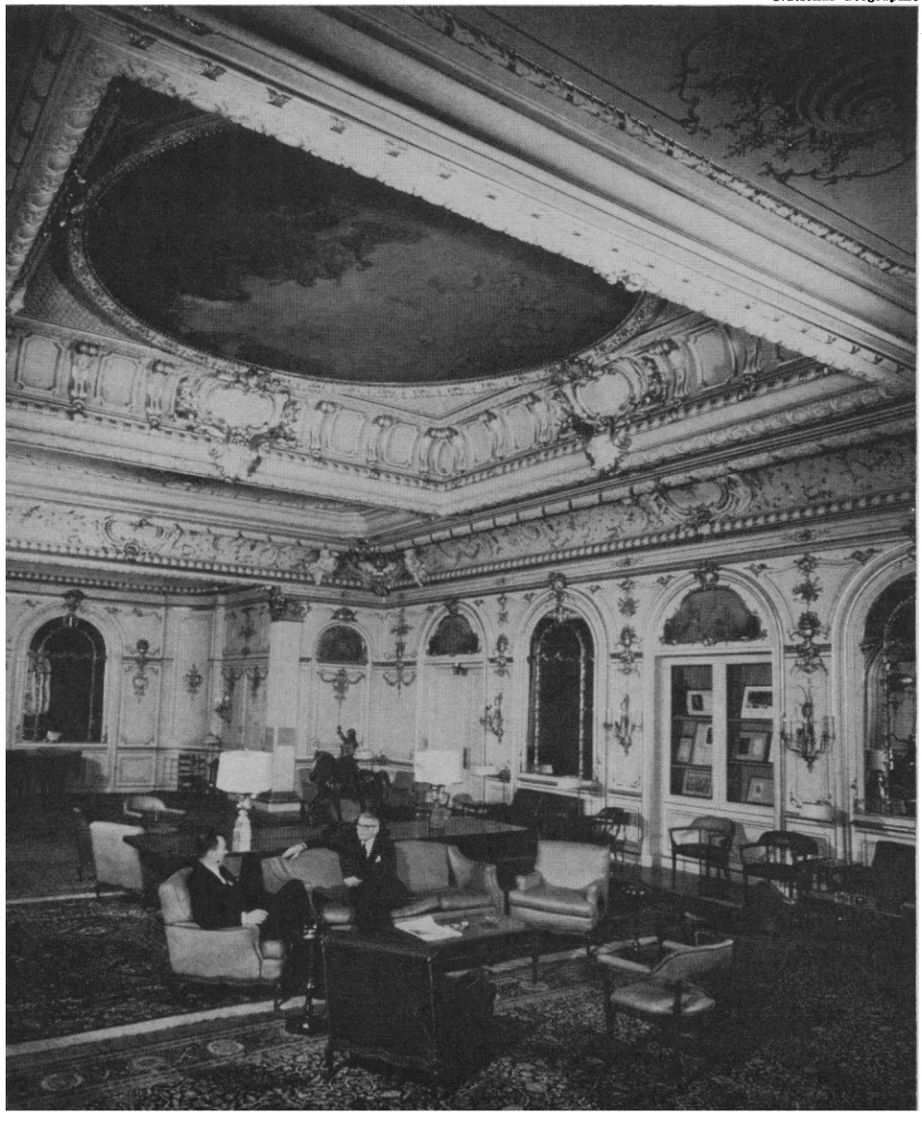
Although the Admissions Committee does relatively little independent research and depends heavily on the sponsor's skill in presenting his candidate, politicking and special pleading are frowned on, and sponsors are not permitted to let the presumption of merit substitute for a marshaling of the facts. Almost every club member, no matter how eminent, appears to have had the experience of having one of his candidates rejected, in part because he may have failed to do his homework. Thus, it is never claimed that everyone of distinction is in the club, just that everyone who is in the club is distinguished. The club's monthly bulletins occasionally plead with the members to refrain from inane comments on a candidate, such as "he has a lovely

Cosmos Club

Cosmos Club exterior

Warne Lounge

National Geographic



wife" (all nominees, one such notice pointed out, seemed to have lovely wives), and to concentrate on the hard facts of the candidate's professional qualifications, to which the Admissions Committee tries studiously to limit its judgments.

How well the committee manages to do this became a subject of dispute in the winter of 1962 when the committee's rejection of Carl Rowan became public and involved the club in the only *cause célèbre* of an unspotted history. Rowan, a Negro journalist appointed by Kennedy to the post of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, was sponsored for membership by radio commentator Raymond Swing and a fellow State Department officer, Edwin Kretzman. The chance that Rowan would be rejected for reasons apart from his race was always present. In that year, for example, the club took in 110 members and rejected 57; the following year it took 156 and rejected 36. (The numbers vary a good deal from year to year, depending on the number of places available, the number proposed for membership, and the zealousness of the committee. The limit of active members has just been raised from 2250 to 2500.) Although Negro guests were always freely admitted, however, at the time there were neither any Negro members nor any official policy, positive or negative, about admitting any. Rowan's nomination had provoked considerable notice, and it was widely known within the club that a particularly important decision was pending.

At the same time that the committee was considering Rowan's nomination it also had in hand the nomination of President Kennedy, which had been submitted by John Kenneth Galbraith and James B. Conant. When it became known through a New York *Times* story the morning following the committee meeting on 9 January that Rowan had been rejected, it was widely assumed that his race had influenced the committee. The committee—pledged to secrecy—was unable to clarify the issue or to make any disclosures about its actual motivation, and the fight was on. Galbraith, then our Ambassador in India, resigned from the club, thereby terminating Kennedy's nomination. He was soon joined in resignation by several other members, including radio newsman Howard K. Smith, historian Bruce Catton, and Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations, Harlan Cleveland. A handful of other mem-

bers, it should be noted, announced their resignations to the press but neglected to notify the club, and still enjoy the privileges of membership.

Other members, equally concerned, declined to resign. They planned instead to try to change what they took to be the club's discriminatory policy at the annual meeting scheduled for the following week. This group included Jerome Wiesner (Kennedy's science adviser), Governor Rockefeller of New York, Senator Ernest Gruening (D–Alaska), and a large number of other members who felt that the club's reputation for making judgments on exclusively intellectual criteria had been compromised. The annual meeting, an event which routinely attracts anywhere from 125 to 300 members, on this occasion brought in 620. After considerable discussion, the members finally passed by voice vote a declaration reading: "Resolved: That the members of the Cosmos Club . . . do hereby declare that the exclusion of any person from membership on account of religion, color, race, or national origin is incompatible with the principles of the Cosmos Club."

Despite the members' conclusive action—and partly because of it—the episode was divisive, chiefly because it exposed as controversial two issues that previously had been pretty much taken for granted. The first of these was the race question, for it was surprising to many members to discover that the Cosmos Club, like most human institutions, had its share of bigots. The second issue was the nature of the club itself, and how its members felt about it. The faith of some members that their club was an institution of scholars and gentlemen elected solely for intellectual merit was shaken; other members felt injured that the adherence of the club to this fundamental proposition could even now be called into question.

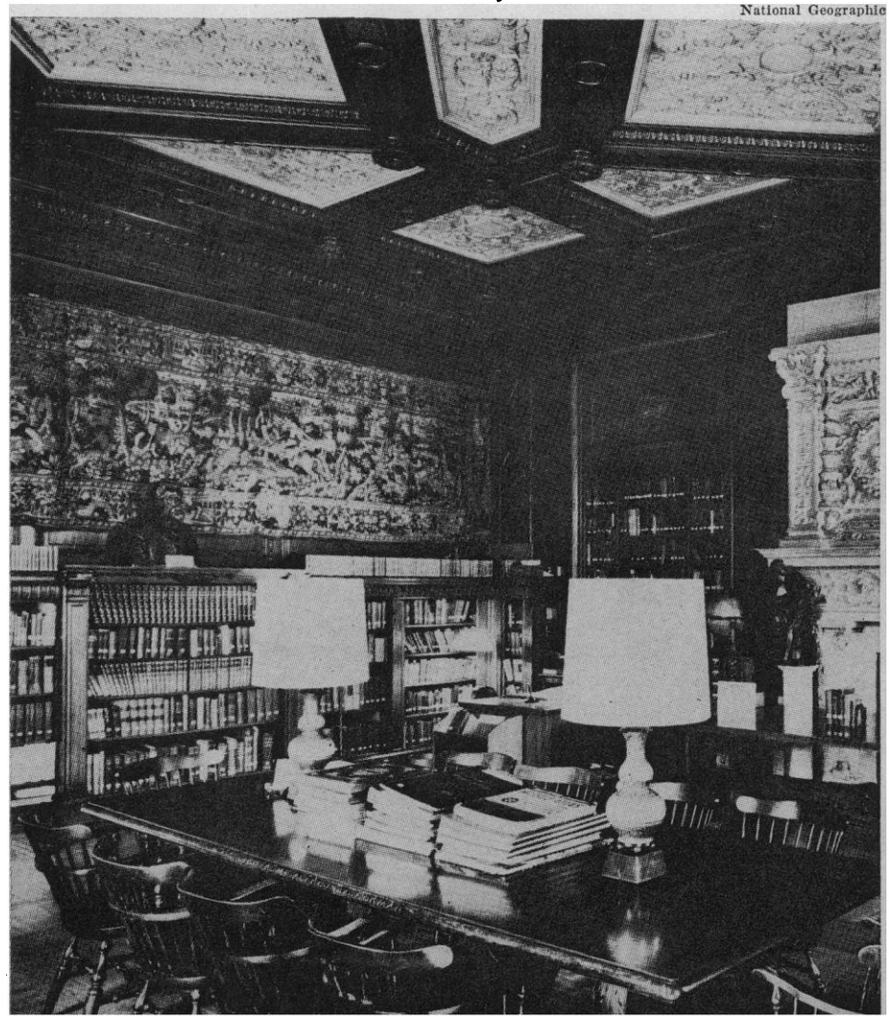
The depth of the misunderstanding can be partly measured by the fact that the following year, when the members who resigned sought reinstatement as a group, their appeal was rejected. In part this may have been because the club has never taken resignations too kindly, but there was also an element of disciplining the bloc for having been so disloyal as to believe the worst and so indiscreet as to make a public fuss. A contributing factor was the timing. The request for readmission was made shortly after the Admissions Committee had elected the club's first Negro member, historian John Hope Franklin. It

National Geographic

Grand stairway

The library

National Geographic



seemed to many members that welcoming the prodigals would have had the effect of certifying their implicit contention that there had once been a discriminatory policy but that it had now been altered. It was also felt that the incident had been used to promote the careers of individuals seeking badges of approval from the New Frontier. When asked recently whether he thought those who resigned were more conspicuously liberal than those who did not, a member who was an officer at the time said, "Let's just put it this way: they were more conspicuous." Although it is impossible to communicate the wounded look that still crosses the faces of those closely involved with the club when the episode is recalled, the issue of discrimination has been decisively settled, and in the intervening period the club has admitted several Negro members.

Despite the predominant role of the Admissions Committee, the basic shape of the membership is determined by what the members put into the hopper. About half the present active members live outside of Washington, but the club is essentially a Washington affair, and its character is heavily influenced by what is going on in Washington at any particular time. An individual's merit may not be at all affected, but if he suddenly finds himself a Washington office-holder after living for many years on a college campus in Pennsylvania, for example, he is also far more likely to find himself proposed for membership. Thus, a study made in 1955 of membership trends in a 25-year period that began in 1931 revealed very natural peaks, with economists and other social scientists reaching high levels in the early years of the New Deal and the natural scientists (always the largest group) on the rise in the period after World War II. Other groups of members less influenced by Washington events—architects, educators, journalists—have remained approximately constant.

Of the categories of election, the most widely used is "meritorious original work." Distinction in public service is second, but public officials are easy to come by in Washington, and to be elected in this category it is generally necessary that the nominee shall have been outstanding in one way or another before he came to his government post. As for the category of "cultivation," it appears that the gifted amateur is a rarity these days, and even the Cosmos Club is short of Renaissance Men who meet the qualification. For the last few years it has not been used at all. Officially, it is club policy to encourage the nomination of younger members, and inducements to membership—such as lower dues and entrance fees—have been devised. In fact, however, younger men are rarely proposed, chiefly, it appears, because they have to spend so much time in the laboratory or with growing families that they express less interest in membership. Thus, while the club has 37 members under 40, the average age of members on admission appears to hover between 50 and 55. A brochure published by the club reports that one of its members, Robert C. Cook, inscribed a copy of his book entitled *Human Fertility—the Modern Dilemma*, "To the members of the Cosmos Club where fertility has ceased to be a dilemma and has become an abstraction."

Except perhaps for the handful of elderly members who actually live in parts of the clubhouse where women are not permitted, members of the club show few signs of being active misogynists. To some extent, however, they appear to regard the club as a bulwark against invasive togetherness, a refuge for serious discussion undisturbed by the murmurs of wives about recipes or the mutterings of children about bedtime. How well their fortress will withstand the growing numbers of women succeeding in the professions is not clear, for some of the more impish members are already considering proposing a distinguished woman scholar for membership. ("It would probably provoke 50 resignations," said a mischievous former club officer hearing of this plan, "and I'd be in favor of every one of 'em.") But once there were lady members, the logic of restricting members' wives to the first-floor dining room and parlors they are now free to ramble in would diminish, and the necessity of tending to the ladies would undoubtedly shift the balance between social and professional intercourse decidedly in the direction of the former.

For now, however, the Cosmos Club is safely a man's world, and if for the majority it serves a purpose that falls somewhere between that of the Statler Hilton and that of the college fraternity house, for a large number it is as indispensable as Howard Johnson's for the motorist with small children. The most frequent use of the club is for that schizophrenic institution, the semi-business lunch. In a city where status and hierarchies obstruct the conduct of affairs as much as they promote it, casual get-togethers have a way of turning into state occasions. For two men to meet unself-consciously is frequently impossible, for the most minute occurrences become interpretable as slights or concessions and take on political significance. The head of a private research laboratory, for example, queried about his use of the club, said that he would go to great lengths to avoid the indignities that might develop if he simply called up the head of a federal agency and asked for an appointment. "Simply asking to come to his office," he said, "would put me in the position of supplicant, and this would inevitably be compounded by a variety of accidents bound to affect our meeting. The fellow might have a long distance call that he simply had to take. He might be called into sudden conference with the President, or have to dictate a memo to his secretary. Where would I be? Twiddling my thumbs and gazing at the wall and feeling silly. Even the choice of a restaurant for a luncheon appointment can be a problem," he continued. "Is it nearer my office or his office? Whose secretary calls to make reservations? At the Cosmos Club you know everybody's equal —you're on neutral territory—and everybody can relax."

Club's Usefulness

In much the same way, it appears, communication between high officials of two separate agencies is greatly eased by the club, since it provides an occasion to meet with no trail of consultants, no train of note-takers, and relative privacy. "At the Cosmos Club," a high government science administrator said recently, "you don't doubt other people's motives so much. There is less worry about bureaucratic rivalries and more recognition that you're just two guys trying your damndest to solve a tough problem. It may be that we should all be men enough to overcome these obstacles right in our own offices," he acknowledged, "but as long as we're not, the Cosmos Club will continue to be exceedingly useful." Discussing the same point, another member said, "Delicate relationships in all kinds of fields benefit from the Cosmos Club. Outside the club, men are just part of the everyday world—harried bureaucrats or busy scientists with a million things on their minds. But in the con-

text of the club they become 'distinguished,' and this seems to have a benign influence on their behavior."

This does not mean that it is not prefectly possible to function in Washington's top science circles without being a member of the Cosmos Club. It is. David Lilienthal (a member), if his memoirs are a reliable guide, managed to get through his entire term as chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission without visiting the club more than a handful of times, and some of the chief scientific advisers of the Johnson Administration, as well as many strategically placed civil servants, are not members. Nor does it appear to be particularly disruptive if the chief of an agency is not a club member while some of his subordinates are. But the large number of notables who collect there every day is ample indication that, in general, membership in the club is a decided aid to performing well in this city. (Last year, a frustrated scientist, asked whether he had been quoted accurately as saying that the only way to find out what was going on in space experiments was to sit around the Cosmos Club, replied, "No, that's simply one of the better ways.") What applies to domestic science circles also applies to international ones. The scientific attaché of a foreign embassy will do his job much better if he is one of the few given special visitor's privileges at the club, simply because he will be in a better position to know what is going on.

A Role in History

Next to the business lunch or dinner, the most common use of the club is for informal group sessions, either in its private rooms or in the stately public lounges. If men want to talk about conservation, the war on poverty, life on the moon, or the Chinese bomb, and if they want to do it unimpeded by the amenities of a social gathering or by pressure to pay the check and move along, chances are good that they will choose the Cosmos Club. In the old days these all-male gatherings produced such events as the founding of the National Geographic Society (still closely tied to the Cosmos Club by sentiment and an informal overlapping of directors) and the establishment, during World War I, of the National Research Council as a means of helping the government mobilize science for the emergency. Most of the original NRC officers were Cosmos Club members, and the same can be said of the officers of almost every institution which has supplemented the NRC in the realm of science-government affairs. More recently the club served as an intellectual proving ground for the wartime advisory staff charged with overseeing development of the atomic bomb, and as a meeting place for those debating the creation of the National Science Foundation. One longtime club officer, pressed for an opinion on which government scientific activities could be most closely linked with the Cosmos Club, discovered that he could not think of a major decision affecting science that was *not* connected with the club in one way or another. How many minor projects have grown out of even more casual encounters between men who meet by chance at the special table set up for unaccompanied members, or who share the club's overnight facilities on trips to Washington for professional meetings or consultation with the government, one cannot even begin to guess.

Although the uncommercial quality of life at the Cosmos Club is what endears it most to its members, this occasionally makes things trying for the club managers and other employees, who perform a wide range of services for the members, running from arranging a square dance for someone's teenage daughter to catering a black-tie dinner for a visiting science minister. Most of this the club staff takes in very good grace. If they get fretful, for example, at the sight of one elderly member sitting himself down at a table for eight when a party of seven is anxious to be served, in general they are tolerant of the members' foibles and pleased to be serving such illustrious masters. (One of the managers, discussing an observation frequently made to him that the club attracted "a very good class of help," said, "it is not true that they are very special to begin with, but they *become* a good class by working here.")

As for the members, they appear to take in stride the idiosyncrasies of their colleagues, smiling tolerantly and following the club's unwritten rule that members seeking peace and quiet should not be disturbed. In general, the members take an affectionate view of the club, regarding whatever defects they discover with charity. This is particularly true of the food which, though generally abused by the members, is frequently quite creditable. The idea seems to be more or less, "if we cared about mere *food* we could go to the Jockey Club or La Salle du Bois, but we come here in search of more than food and have our minds on higher things." But the Cosmos Club is about as ascetic as the Palace of Versailles, and for a group such as the scientists, who like to act as if they were only a generation away from the garret, the overall effect is exceedingly comfortable, if not actually lush. The lushness, like the other attributes of this establishment, is regarded as essentially a private affair. To those who would criticize or protest, the Cosmos Club would simply reply in the words of St. Benedict that hang near the main lobby and serve as the unofficial motto:

"If any pilgrim monk come from distant parts if with wish as a guest to dwell in the monastery, and will be content with the customs which he finds in the place, and do not perchance by his lavishness disturb the monastery, but is simply content with what he finds, he shall be received for as long a time as he desires. If, indeed, he find fault with anything, or expose it, reasonably, and with the humility of charity, the Abbot shall discuss it prudently, lest perchance God had sent him for this very thing. But, if he have been found gossipy and contumacious in the time of his sojourn as guest, not only ought he not to be joined to the body of the monastery, but also it shall be said to him, honestly, that he must depart. If he does not go, let two stout monks, in the name of God, explain the matter to him."

—ELINOR LANGER

Fermi Award: Rickover Honored; Selection Signals Some Changes

Vice Admiral H. G. Rickover has been named to receive the Atomic Energy Commission's Enrico Fermi award for 1964. The Fermi award, which consists of a gold medal, a citation, and, this year, $25,000, is made by the commission after consideration of recommendations by the AEC's General Advisory Committee. Presidential approval is required.

As winner of the award, Rickover is cited "for engineering and administrative leadership in the development of safe and reliable nuclear power and its successful application to our national security and economic needs."

Rickover, since the war, has played