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The Office of Science and Technology

Five years ago the United States and the U.S.S.R. were involved in an intense cold war. There seemed urgent need for efficient use of resources for research and development.

In this atmosphere the Office of Science and Technology was formally established. Among other functions, the director of OST was to advise and assist the President "with respect to major policies . . ." and with "review, integration, and coordination of major federal activities in science and technology. . . ." More than two-thirds of all research and development work in this country is federally financed. Thus the director of OST and his staff of 18, together with the President's Science Advisory Committee and some part-time consultants, were expected to mastermind most R & D in this country.

After 5 years the structure of the science advisory apparatus remains unchanged. However, the circumstances are different. Concern over the Russian peril has faded and has been replaced largely by concern over domestic issues, such as urban problems, and Vietnam. There is another President, and another Science Adviser, and their styles are not those of their predecessors.

Perhaps the greatest change is in the approach of Congress toward problems involving science and technology. This in turn reflects altered public attitudes. When the big problems were top-secret, the public did not expect wide participation by Congress. However, contemporary issues such as air and water pollution are matters on which the people expect participation by and action from their representatives. Another prod has come from the widespread belief that federal R & D funds are a key to economic progress. Whatever the causes, Congress today effectively participates and often leads in science policy making.

The prospects are that Congress will seize an even larger role. Congress controls the purse. It also provides effective means of shaping and weighing public opinion, through congressional hearings. When the issues are simple and dramatic, the President can dominate the scene. When the issues are many and complex, Congress can take the lead, as it did on pollution. An important aspect of hearings is the public record that results. These documents are valuable sources of technical information, and they often influence members of Congress.

During the past 2½ years Congress has availed itself of a new mechanism, the Science Policy Research Division of the Legislative Reference Service of the Library of Congress. In the last fiscal year, 33 committees or subcommittees of Congress sought assistance from the Division, and 168 representatives and 54 senators called on the Division for help. The Division has prepared a series of excellent reports. The latest of these* is a rich source of information concerning OST. Within the limitations of his opportunities, the director, Donald Hornig, has done a good job. However, in comparison with the scholarly record compiled by Congress and its Library staff, or in comparison with the output of ideas in the publications of the National Academy of Sciences, OST and the White House science apparatus have not been very productive. Such a performance would have been merely regrettable under the circumstances of 5 years ago. Today, this deficiency is costly of prestige and could lead to a back seat in science policy making.

—PHILIP H. ABELSON

*The report is available from The Military Operations Subcommittee, House of Representatives, B 373 Rayburn Building, Washington, D.C. 20025.