Congress: Muskie Seeks Committee on Technological Backlash

A "near-scandalous" failure to determine whether atmospheric pollution will cause a worldwide catastrophe some 50 to 100 years from now was cited last week as prime evidence of the need for new congressional mechanisms to deal with the adverse consequences of technology. In 3 days of hearings before the Senate Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations, chaired by Edmund S. Muskie (D–Maine), several prominent scientists and engineers warmly endorsed one of Muskie's pet projects—the establishment of a select Senate committee on technology and the human environment. They suggested that such a committee might help forestall inadvertent environmental disasters, and might also provide the senators with a better means of evaluating the Defense Department's persistent requests for more and better military technology.

Muskie has introduced his proposal in two previous Congresses only to see it sidetracked because fellow senators feared the proposed new committee would intrude on their jurisdictions. Muskie told *Science* his proposal was opposed the first time by Senator Henry M. Jackson (D–Wash.), chairman of the Subcommittee on National Security and International Operations, and the second time by Senator Fred R. Harris (D–Okla.), chairman of the Subcommittee on Government Research. However, Muskie said his latest proposal, which broadens the membership of the select committee somewhat, "may have satisfied everyone." The committee would include 21 members, three from each of seven standing Senate committees whose activities affect the individual and his environment. The new committee, according to Muskie, "would create a central forum in the Senate to investigate the future impact of science and technology—its benefits and its hazards—on our people, their communities, and on industry." It would serve as a study group, and would have no jurisdiction over legislation.

There was some disagreement among the expert witnesses last week over how fast the world is going to pot. Herbert A. Simon, professor of computer science and psychology at Carnegie-Mellon University and a member of the President's Science Advisory Committee, suggested that the harmful side effects of technology are not necessarily worse today than they were centuries ago—we are simply more sensitized to the problem. On the other hand, Jerome B. Wiesner, former science adviser to President John F. Kennedy, said we are "engaged in a race between catastrophe and the intelligent use of technology, that it's not all clear we are going to win." Both the optimists and the pessimists agreed on one point, however: More attention should be paid to the environmental impact of technology.

The possibility that atmospheric pollution may cause a climatic catastrophe was raised by Thomas F. Malone, senior vice president and director of research for the Travelers Insurance Companies, and by several other witnesses, including Wiesner. The witnesses noted that some experts predict that an increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere may produce a warming effect which would melt the ice caps and cause widespread flooding around the world, while other experts predict that an increase in particulate matter will have quite the opposite effect, namely, it might lead to a colder climate and increased glaciation. "We have at hand the means to analyze and assess through simulation techniques the degree of hazard that exists before we get into trouble," Malone said, "but we're not getting on with the task . . . this situation borders on the near-scandalous."

Other problems cited as worthy of the new committee's attention were the spread of DDT through the environment, the impact of television, the development of alternatives to the internal combustion engine, the population explosion, and a host of problems in such areas as housing, transportation, water resources, communications, education, energy, and community development. Harvey Brooks, dean of engineering and applied physics at Harvard University, suggested that perhaps 10 percent of the gross national product, or some $80 billion, should be allocated to improving the environment.

Although most of the hearing was devoted to civilian problems, Muskie raised questions about "rather heedless" expenditures on military technology, and Wiesner suggested that Congress might set up a sophisticated staff group to analyze military proposals. He suggested that the group might be considered an "anti-RAND" because it would counterbalance the intellectual support given to the military by such "think tanks" as the RAND Corporation of Santa Monica, California.

Wiesner acknowledged that there are security problems involved in discussing military technology, but he raised the interesting question of whether the nation might not be better off without military secrecy. Too often, he said, military secrecy hides information from the citizenry that is almost certainly known to potential enemies. As one example, he cited the stationing of spy ships near hostile shores. As another, he said "there was a period when both the Russians and we were doing a lot of flying at each other's air defense system, and we would publicize what the Russians did and not what we did, and vice versa." As a result, Wiesner said, "each country's public in all innocence was getting angry at the other side, whereas neither military group was very angry about it because they knew it was part of the business."

Wiesner also suggested that a lessening of secrecy would produce better debates on the wisdom of such military programs as the development of chemical and biological weapons. He said the CBW program was reviewed in the White House under President Kennedy, but seems to have grown considerably since then. "It has always seemed to me a sort of marginal investment," he said.

Wiesner cautioned that he was not advocating the abolition of military security. But he suggested that an assessment be made as to whether secrecy has done more harm than good. He noted that fears inspired by military secrecy in both the United States and the Soviet Union have fueled the arms race.

Summing up the adverse consequences of military and civilian technology, Wiesner said it's hard to blame students for objecting to the kind of world they are inheriting. "Any intelligent person who doesn't have a vested interest in not protesting ought to protest," he said.—PHILIP M. BOFFEY