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The Federal Science Advisory Apparatus

The structure of the changed federal science advisory apparatus is now taking form. In many ways, the old plan has been preserved, but significant differences are present. Guyford Stever has been designated the President's Science Adviser, named chairman of the Federal Council on Science and Technology, and assigned responsibilities in the foreign exchange programs. He also heads a group whose function is similar to that of the old Office of Science and Technology. In these respects, his position is similar to that of the former adviser, Edward David.

There are major differences, two of which have been repeatedly emphasized. One is that Stever's position in the hierarchy is lower than that formerly enjoyed by David. A second is that Stever has great responsibilities as director of the National Science Foundation. A third major difference, and one that has not received much attention, is in the President's Science Adviser's source of advice. An important component of the previous system was the President's Science Advisory Committee (PSAC). This body of 18 experts was a weighty factor in science policy. In the early days of PSAC (the late 1950's), the committee functioned especially well. The tasks it worked on were largely related to the national defense. Members were physical scientists expert in those matters. With time, the problems changed, became more people-oriented—poverty, crime, transportation, and the environment, to name a few. It was no longer possible for a committee of 18 to include experts in all the areas.

Members of PSAC, being an elite group and occupying a lofty station in the scheme of things, fell victim to a common human disease: arrogance. This was manifested both publicly and privately, but mainly privately. Behind the scenes, PSAC attempted to wield great influence on the decisions and policies of the various governmental agencies. In the process, the part-time committee made full-time enemies. The major political blunder, however, was that members of PSAC occasionally disagreed publicly with the President. This occurred both in Democratic and in Republican administrations. Public and private squabbles are part of the democratic process, but when they occur in the President's own family, they add to his burdens and destroy the value of such an advisory group.

In his role as President's Science Adviser, Stever will find it necessary to seek counsel from scientists and engineers outside the government. In his position as director of the National Science Foundation, he already has access to many sources of advice. In addition, it appears that he will make some use of the potentialities of the scientific and technical societies. Many of these have organized committees on science policy matters. Some have established Washington offices.

On 10 September, Stever conducted a meeting of presidents or principal officers of most of the major scientific and engineering organizations. Societies totaling nearly a million members were represented. Stever indicated that he would welcome policy advice and recommendations concerning personnel. As specific problems arise, the appropriate organizations will be tapped. Thus it seems that a major difference between the new and the old apparatus will be the replacement of a small, formal, elite group by more broadly based ad hoc groups. The concept is worth a try. Whether it will be viable will depend on how effectively it is implemented by both sides.—PHILIP H. ABELSON