Kistiakowsky Diary as Eisenhower's Science Adviser Out

*A Scientist in the White House** by George B. Kistiakowsky is the only extended, first-hand account to be published of a Presidential science adviser's experience since the job was created shortly after sputnik. James R. Killian, Jr., was the first to fill the post; Kistiakowsky succeeded Killian, serving as President Eisenhower's science adviser from July 1959 until the end of Eisenhower's time in office in early 1961.

The book is essentially the diary kept by Kistiakowsky during that year and a half. It includes an introduction by Duke historian Charles S. Maier and some helpful commentary and annotations by Kistiakowsky, but its virtues and defects are those of the diary form: it puts issues and events into the perspective of the daily demands of the office, but lacks the post-factum reflections of a memoir.

What the diary does clearly document is that the science adviser and the President's Science Advisory Committee (PSAC) at that stage were heavily engaged with security matters—weapons systems, arms control, and space. Kistiakowsky's White House service came during a period of crucial debates on the strategic missile buildup and arms control efforts. The civilian offices which had been established in the Pentagon to counterbalance the military analysts were still developing. And Eisenhower turned to the White House science advisory apparatus both because he felt he needed a competent second opinion and because he apparently regarded Kistiakowsky with increasing trust and esteem.

Kistiakowsky was hardly a neophyte at high-level science advising. A chemist, he had been centrally involved in the World War II atom bomb project and, in the postwar years, like many Los Alamos alumni had continued to provide expert counsel to the government. In the latter 1950's he was called on to advise on the growing U.S. missile program and, after Killian became science adviser, Kistiakowsky frequently accompanied Killian to see President Eisenhower to report on the program.

As the diary attests, these were the twilight years of the doctrine of "massive retaliation" which Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had proclaimed in Eisenhower's first term. The bomber was giving way to the missile as the dominant strategic weapon, and Soviet progress in rocketry, later oversold as the "missile gap," did give the Russians an edge in space activities at the time because of their lead in large boosters.

A major problem for the Administration was to bring order to somewhat chaotic conditions in the U.S. space and missile programs. Interservice rivalries over the control of missile development and a proliferation of expensive projects drove Eisenhower to seek ways to end the competition and confusion, particularly since U.S. launch vehicles were blowing up with embarrassing frequency.

Kistiakowsky and PSAC were centrally engaged in efforts to rationalize the missile programs and seem to have played a major role in defining the space program and assuring that it was placed under civilian control.

A substantial portion of the diary is devoted to arms control matters, specifically efforts to negotiate limitations on nuclear weapons with the Soviets. Eisenhower until late in his presidency appears to have hoped to make progress toward the reduction, even the eventual outlawing, of nuclear weapons. The U-2 incident in the spring of 1960, when the Soviets shot down a high-altitude American spy plane, caused cancellation of a planned summit meeting and blighted arms control prospects for the balance of Eisenhower's tenure. The negotiations on technical issues conducted during this period, however, helped to prepare the way for the less ambitious partial test ban treaty which is remembered as a major Kennedy diplomatic triumph.

Kistiakowsky and PSAC spent much less time dealing with civil science than did subsequent science advisers, but in this category they encountered issues which were to be recurring concerns of the office. The functioning of the science office in the State Department was then, as subsequently, a sore point. The "cranberry crisis" which arose when traces of a probably carcinogenic herbicide were found in the cranberry crop, foreshadowed the difficulties the government would encounter in dealing with environmental hazards. And there was the uneasy relationship with the Bureau of the Budget which was to grow thorny in later years.

Kistiakowsky apparently made the decision to publish fairly recently. He says he kept the private diary at the suggestion of his "friend and mentor" James B. Conant, to keep the record straight on who said what to whom. Getting the diary cleared officially for publication would be a complicated matter because it alludes to some matters discussed in National Security Council meetings—such discussions are automaticallly classified. But in the atmosphere created by the appearance of the Pentagon Papers and other much more sensitive material, and after the passage of so much time, Kistiakowsky decided the diary should be published.

Kistiakowsky says that no references to secret material were included in the original version of the diary, and that he went over the text "with a fine tooth comb" to be sure that no indirect references would provide hints on such matters. There are, for example, no really illuminating discussions of intelligence satellites, which were in a significant stage of development then. Kistiakowsky says that he recorded the diary entries regularly after hours. To forestall any criticism that he is profiting personally from work done, so to speak, on government time, he has assigned profits from the book to the chemistry department at Harvard where he is an emeritus.

Kistiakowsky's book is not a history of the era, but it provides a record that historians will welcome and readers interested in the activities of scientists in government will enjoy. Kistiakowsky took over an office organized by Killian, a skillful administrator. As a scientist, Kistiakowsky was probably able to establish closer rapport with other scientists than Killian had. Kistiakowsky dealt with a relatively small number of very important issues, having arrived at the White House before the business of the science adviser diffused and the establishment of the Office of Science and Technology removed the science adviser to the somewhat more remote Executive Office of the President. And, as important as anything else, he hit it off well with Eisenhower. Because of all these circumstances, therefore, it seems very possible to argue that Kistiakowsky was the most influential science adviser so far.

—J.W.

*Harvard University Press, $15.