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Thoughts on Reorganization

Among the superstitions of modern societies, few match the lures of reorganization. Like taking the waters, in a quieter age, overwrought managers now reach for reorganization as an all-purpose cure. Anyone who has served in government is reminded of the rumble of tectonic activity followed by transient surface eruptions.

Still, reorganization has its uses. It serves, however briefly, to let in light and break old habits. Occasionally it veers in the direction of harnessing power and resources for the work that must be done. If it rarely does this well, it is because counterpressures drive us to cut deals, so that the outcome is less than meets the eye.

Now the Carter Administration is busy with reorganization studies on a scale that has not been attempted since the Hoover Commission. It will be a very different kind of exercise. The agenda of government looks entirely different, and priorities and values have changed in many ways. Science and technology are part of the action to an extent that would surprise the Hoover Commission, and they figure large in government's doings at home and abroad. How much of this is getting through to the reorganization planners is not clear. But if reorganization is going to touch science and technology sooner or later, the starting point ought to be a critique of policy management. Structures and landscaping can wait.

If we try to comprehend what has been happening to American science and technology since World War II, three features stand out. First, science and technology have been *politicized* because of the one-sided leverage of government. Next, they are being *secularized* as lay publics participate in negotiating their right uses. And third, science and technology have been *internationalized* by the advent of new and tougher problems such as the management of the biosphere, population pressure on life support systems, and the claims of developing countries. These changes spell an aching need for new frameworks of goal-setting. Reorganization should be concerned with more than body counts and administrative dispositions.

Reorganization in government's scientific and technical affairs ought to start with the correction of flaws in policy management. Science and technology still cool their heels in the waiting rooms of American diplomacy. There is still no visible focus in government for the stimulation of innovation and risk-taking in the market economy. With one hand, public policy tries to shape energy policies, while with the other, it intimidates industry from sharing know-how which could speed solutions. Well-meant regulation stretches out capital improvements which could raise productivity. Centers of excellence in research and standards-setting, like the Bureau of Standards, have been allowed to run downhill. And government is only beginning to look searchingly into the relationships between research and development and the nation's unmet economic potential.

If these and other shortfalls could be looked into with some care, there would be a point to tackling the questions of reorganization. A Noah's ark of science and technology is the last thing we need. Nor is it sensible to shake up the whole anatomy of science in government. But with better policy aims to start with, there are both near-term and future options. One is to remake the Commerce Department into a Department of Industry Economics and Technology. Another is to recombine the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the Bureau of Standards, and the National Science Foundation in an Office of Scientific Research and Development with resources to tackle barriers to productivity and innovation and marshal federal laboratories to better serve federal, state and local, and industrial needs.

So there is an agenda for reorganization, after all, if we can first put our science and technology policies in order.—WILLIAM D. CAREY