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Public and Private Policies for R & D

AAAS held its third annual R & D Policy Colloquium in Washington in late June. Once again, the academic and industrial sectors mingled and debated with key spokespersons from the White House, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and Congress. This was no public rally to wring more money out of the government's hard-pressed purse. On the contrary, the colloquium struggled with large and vexing uncertainties which pervade the many-sided structure of U.S. research and development, and the give-and-take was refreshingly frank.

The framework for the colloquium was set by the special AAAS "R & D Report" prepared by Willis Shapley and Don Phillips, analyzing President Carter's budget decisions on research and development and exploring the indicative evidence concerning industrial research and the connections between R & D and the performance of the national economy. Aside from its merits in sizing the current government mind-set toward R & D, the report provides a unified view of the disordered terrain that we like to call "science and technology policy." It is important reading.

The colloquium made several things clear. Government is now reaching for consensus approaches to national science and technology policies. There is still some life left in the system of checks and balances in the relations between politics and science. It is up to the scientific and technological communities to get into the act and help to construct the terms on which the United States will both pursue the search for knowledge and reach a less ambiguous view of the contributions of R & D to the technology base of the nation's economy. Equally clear are the risks associated with underinvestment in basic research, the confusion among public policies that promote science and others that discourage innovation, and the vulnerability of R & D as discretionary outlays in the emerging national distemper toward the high price of government.

But the colloquium suggests something else that is on the cheerful side. As we look at the federal government, in a number of ways the quality of policy management for R & D begins to be impressive. There is, at this point, an unmistakable search for a better architecture of science and technology policy, on the part of the Executive as well as Congress. We begin to see a blending of science policy with economic and budget policies, together with a definite tilt toward multiyear fiscal strategies, starting with the 1980 budget. Even in the area of science and technology indicators there is evidence not only of lively development but also of intentions to link such indicators directly to policy management. None of this signifies that public policy for science and technology has done more than turn the corner, much less that it is settled or complete. What it does indicate is that public policymakers, few of whom are at home with science, are trying very hard to cope. The White House study of the problems afflicting industrial risk-taking, in an environment of public policy uncertainty, is sufficient evidence of this.

One example of the candor displayed at the AAAS colloquium was OMB's revelation that the 1980 budget, now being scripted, will be exceedingly tight because of inflationary danger signals. Research and Development may well feel the pinch, barely 1 year after experiencing a growth budget. This exemplifies the predicament assailing the whole process of public policy-making: an itch for durable science policies on the one hand, and the mischief created by near-term discontinuities on the other. But if there is bad news, there is good news too, and it is the new awareness by government of research and development as necessary public and private investment and as very good economics. That constitutes high ground for science and technology in the long run, and it is ground that can be held.

—WILLIAM D. CAREY