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FITC: Something New or More of the Same?

On 29 March 1978 President Carter announced his Administration's plan to create a Foundation for International Technological Cooperation (FITC). The proposed foundation will be considered in this session of Congress and is expected to be part of the 1980 budget. The purpose of the FITC is to expand knowledge and increase the availability of technology to meet the needs of developing countries. The FITC will engage in or contract for programs aimed at building an indigenous capacity for science and technology in developing countries as well as a capacity to plan for expansion of the technical sector and for amelioration of side effects of such expansion. It will support and foster direct nongovernmental linkages among scientists, planners, and analysts engaged in development activities in the United States and developing countries.

The FITC offers an opportunity to foster a collegial, expert-to-expert, nonbureaucratic, nonpatronizing, no-strings-attached approach. It could also be a signal of real change in the U.S. response to the entirely new environment for development. The foundation form appears to promise that assistance will be awarded on the basis of the merit of proposals. A major expansion of the arm's-length foundation model for exchange of personnel, experts, and professional groups has long been needed in international programs. The Agency for International Development (AID) has provided some support to the development of collegial, productive exchanges by funding programs such as those of the Board on Science and Technology for International Development of the National Academy of Sciences. But AID support has been too small in relation to the need and has been conducted in the shadow, real or perceived, of an agency dominated by American political objectives abroad and political pressures at home.

Widespread consultation gives encouragement that the FITC will be well planned, adequately funded for this time of necessary budget restraint, and launched with the support and enthusiasm that are needed. But there is a real hazard that it may not keep a sufficient distance from government and make a distinct break with the past, and without these features the enterprise will surely fail. The FITC will probably become one of the group of agencies under the general rubric of a new International Development Cooperation Agency. Such a placement may be administratively necessary, but it would be risky. A major part of the FITC budget and possibly of its personnel will be transferred from the present AID. Its public board will probably be only advisory, without policy or program responsibilities. The aura of the AID, fair or unfair though the image may be, will be very much around. Whatever the true nature of the new agency, it may not be perceived as new and independent.

The proposed foundation offers this country the best available chance to participate in international political and economic development under the present circumstances, which are entirely different from those on which past programs have been based. To succeed, it must be completely insulated from large bilateral national aid programs and their associated political history. It must have, both in fact and in perception, the independence that the word foundation implies.

The United States is at its best in foreign scientific and technological programs when it treats foreigners like colleagues and not like wards. The "ugly American" has too often been a patronizing U.S. expert. A separate foundation, independently operated, can make an immense contribution to development. It may be able to achieve more with limited funds than has been possible with large infusions of capital into development projects. This is a chance to create a long-needed institution; it will be a shame if we fall short of meeting that need.—BREWSTER C. DENNY, *Dean, Graduate School of Public Affairs, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98195*