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Science Policy in Washington

The week of 27 March was an instructive one for observers of American policy-making in the fields of science and technology. It began well, heralded by a special presidential message to Congress which conveyed a strong and inclusive commitment to the advancement of science and spelled out the details of Mr. Carter's State of the Union posture on the importance of science and innovation in the national agenda.

Almost simultaneously, the House of Representatives was voting to undo the National Science Foundation's programs in support of research in the social and behavioral sciences. This exercise in fiscal decapitation occurred in the context of an otherwise remarkably sensible House debate on the NSF's authorization bill. But it is a year in which the cuts must match the increases, and as usual the social and behavioral sciences furnished the sacrifice. To the NSF's contention that "we do not know the dynamics underlying our society and its institutions" came the rebuttal that "NSF may not know this but philosophers and thinkers have been contemplating such concepts for centuries without NSF support and have been able to reach far-ranging conclusions without wasting tax dollars." In the resulting colloquy it was established that the social science research budget would be halved.

In still another quarter, the Senate Budget Committee was readying itself for the markup of the first concurrent Budget Resolution, and one of the options up for decision will be a cut of \$200 million from basic research in NSF, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the Department of Energy. The House Budget Committee is rumored to be preparing cuts of the same magnitude.

To further enliven the week, a spectacular assemblage of industrial, academic, and university leaders met at New York University to identify and debate critical issues in science and technology policy. Judging from the outputs, the United States faces a mounting list of dilemmas along with an enfeebled capacity for their policy resolution. An indigestible feast of problems is not in itself so worrying; the source of deep concern lies in the time constants associated with the central problems of choice. As lead time shrinks while improvisation and misfiring mark the behavior of national policy, the time constants will tend to preempt the outcomes.

On the whole, it was a week to be remembered by science watchers. The presidential message on science and technology, for all of its important substance and policy signals, was scarcely noticed by the media. If it is likewise passed over by the scientific and technological professions, a rare opportunity for feedback will be lost. There is not much incentive for a President to put his views on the line if hardly anybody is listening. If we did things properly, such a message would precipitate baseline hearings in Congress and in the annual meetings of the scientific and professional societies, and the policy intentions expressed in the statement would be examined and argued. Although the budget numbers for science always become major news, perhaps because they are indicators of the short-term research and development market, they are not nearly as important to the prospects of lively science and innovation as is disclosure of the government's policy intentions. How long will it be before this sinks in?

If anything resembling a consensus national policy system for science and technology is to emerge, it should not be the sole province of the executive and legislative organs of government to define it. Industrial and academic science and technology should have a great deal to say about its properties, assumptions, and directions. Happily, this is the mind-set of the House Committee on Science and Technology, which will begin comprehensive hearings in April on the national investment in research and development. Although it was not planned that way, the first week in April could put to rights the unsettling last week of March.—WILLIAM D. CAREY