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Policy Research in an International Setting

The International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), only 10 years old, is in trouble. Several months ago the United States gave notice of withdrawal, and now Britain is following suit. The United States and the Soviet Union had founded the Institute, each underwriting a quarter of the budget and providing leadership: the director, until recently, was American, and the chairman of the council is a high-ranking Soviet science policy official. Most East and West European countries, as well as Japan and Canada, joined the institute and shared the other half of the cost. Even if IIASA survives, possibly with the help of private funding, the original design will not. At a time when another international experiment in policy research—a "European Brookings Institution," to be located in Brussels and funded, in large part, by the Ford Foundation—is getting under way, the reasons for IIASA's precarious condition should be spelled out.

IIASA was created by politicians eager to advance détente and by scientists bent on demonstrating the usefulness of new methods in policy analysis. An international research center came into being where scientists from industrialized countries in the East and West studied common policy issues. Three purposes were to be served simultaneously: cooperation among scientists from different political systems, advances in systems analysis, and usable policy research.

Given enough time and a supportive environment, the experiment could have succeeded. However, renewed tensions between Washington and Moscow deprived IIASA of its political support. An espionage incident, involving a Soviet administrator, did much damage, although it was not related to research at the institute. When the National Science Foundation's budget for international activities was cut, IIASA lost out against bilateral cooperative agreements. The White House and its science policy office gladly endorsed the decision.

Nor did the scientists overseeing American participation in IIASA lend much support. The National Science Board had often voiced concerns about the quality and cost of the work done at IIASA. The National Academy of Sciences, representing the United States in the IIASA council, was mostly interested in the scientific aspects of the work. The Royal Society, too, explained its decision to withdraw on the grounds of questionable scientific quality.

Several evaluations, however, found that IIASA's work held real promise. Having participated in one, I submit that the scientists overseeing the institute failed to understand the nature and requirements of policy research. Such research must take into account the legal, social, and economic dimensions of policy issues. It also must operate under conditions of uncertainty and time constraints. The IIASA directors—Howard Raiffa, Roger Levien, and C. S. Holling—pioneered approaches to policy research that were relevant to the needs of decision-makers, scientifically responsible, and doable in a sensitive international setting. But they found it difficult to convince their various constituencies of the validity of, and the need for, this kind of work.

There are many international scientific institutions, but IIASA is the only one devoted to policy analysis. If IIASA survives, new forms for American participation should be sought. Should it go down, and with it much American leadership, the lesson will be that the design was too complex and the goals too ambitious. In the difficult international environment, a Brookings-like approach to policy research may have a better chance—with less cumbersome arrangements for administrative and scientific oversight, interactions with policy-makers that enrich the work without threatening its independence, and a better mix between social and natural scientists. Whatever IIASA's future, its unique role in East-West relations will be lost once its American and British members pull out—on the eve of 1984.—JURGEN SCHMANDT, *Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, University of Texas, Austin 78712*