Briefing:

Science Diplomats Get Career Boost

U.S. Foreign Service officers who serve as science attachés or in other science and technology posts are gaining a firmer footing on the State Department career ladder. "S&T" jobs, as they are called at State, have never had their own niche in the Foreign Service personnel system. Such assignments have been regarded as offering poorer prospects for promotion than more traditional diplomatic jobs.

The Foreign Service has four career specialties or "cones"—political, economic, consular, and adminstrative. A specific number of promotion slots are allocated to each cone. The new plan, recently given final approval, is to classify science and technology specialists as economic officers occupying a subcone of their own with a quota of promotions allotted to them.

A main aim of the change is to make Foreign Service careers more attractive to candidates with backgrounds in science and technology. Successive secretaries of State have affirmed the importance of science and technology in international affairs, but the impression persisted that those who took science and technology posts risked career limbo. In major U.S. embassies with important responsibilities for science and technology cooperation and reporting, about half the science posts are currently occupied by persons with technical backgrounds from outside the Foreign Service. ■ **J.W.**

U.K. Company to Buy Biogen Lab

The British pharmaceutical company Glaxo has agreed to purchase the Geneva laboratories of the Boston-based company Biogen, a move which is expected to double Glaxo's research efforts in biotechnology. No official price has been given, but it has been unofficially suggested that the deal might involve $50 million.

Included in the sale are the rights to two naturally occurring proteins for which Biogen had developed the techniques of producing in large quantities: interleukin-2 and granulocyte macrophage colony-stimulating factor. The Geneva laboratories were set up by Biogen in 1980 and currently employ about 100 scientists.

In a separate move, the Dutch-based pharmaceutical giant Unilever announced that it was paying the British government $104 million to purchase parts of the Plant Breeding Institute, currently funded by the Agricultural and Food Research Council and parts of the National Seed Development Organisation.

The sale of the plant breeding assets of PBI, which has been receiving an annual grant of $4.7 million from the research council, is part of the government's strategy of selling off public assets where it is felt that these should be managed by the private sector. ■ **D.D.**

Pressure to Construct SSC Builds in House

Construction of the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC) would be authorized under legislation introduced on 7 August by Representatives Manuel Lujan (R–NM), Robert G. Torricelli (D–NJ), Robert A. Roe (D–NJ), and 218 other members of the House. The bill would allow expenditures in fiscal year 1988 of $10 million for "initial construction activities and such funds as may be necessary for 1989 and subsequent fiscal years." In addition, $25 million would be provided for SSC research.

The legislation would not assure construction of the SSC because Congress would still have to include the funds in an appropriations bill. The House Appropriations Committee, while approving $25 million for SSC R&D, refused to allot money for construction. The Senate Appropriations Committee has yet to take a position on the matter, however, and if the authorization bill gains strong support, it would put pressure on the committee to approve the construction funds.

Roe, chairman of the House Space, Science, and Technology Committee, is planning to hold hearings on the authorization bill shortly after Congress reconvenes in September. Roe signed onto the bill, sources say, only after it became clear that a large number of House members would support it. ■ **M.C.**

Promoting International Studies

A new foundation-supported group, the Coalition for the Advancement of Foreign Languages and International Studies (CAFLIS), has been created to promote discussion on how to build the nation's capacity in foreign language and area studies. According to John Vaughn of the Association of American Universities (AAU), CAFLIS is being formed following 2 years of discussion of the issues raised by a 1984 AAU report, "Beyond Growth: The Next Stage in Language and Area Studies."

According to Vaughn, participating organizations will be working to "shape some kind of common view" about what should be done, focusing in particular on the idea of a new national endowment for international studies, perhaps modeled along the lines of the National Science Foundation.

A 13-organization interim steering committee is now looking for an executive director for the coalition, which will be housed in the AAU offices in Washington, D.C. The Ford, Hewlett, McDonnell, and Rockefeller Foundations will supply $150,000 a year for the first 2 years. ■ **C.H.**

Recombinant Organisms Pose No Special Hazard

Activist Jeremy Rifkin has long asserted that scientists do not know how to predict the ecological consequences of releasing recombinant DNA microbes into the environment. But a new report by the National Academy of Sciences challenges that view.

"There is adequate knowledge of the relevant scientific principles, as well as sufficient experience with recombinant DNA techniques to guide the safe and prudent use of such organisms outside research laboratories," said the panel in a report, "Introduction of Recombinant DNA-Engineered Organisms into the Environment: Key Issues."

The panel also concluded that the recombinant DNA microbes pose no special hazards compared to organisms modified by other genetic methods, and that there is adequate knowledge of scientific principles and sufficient experience with recombinant DNA organisms "to guide the safe and prudent use of such organisms outside research laboratories."

These conclusions buttress the federal government's current philosophy about regulating microbes, plants, and animals made by gene-splicing methods. Federal agencies are conducting the same kind of safety reviews of recombinant DNA organisms as they do with products made by traditional biotechnology, such as cell fusion.

The panel also said in the 31-page report that the properties of a particular organism, not the method by which it was made, should be the basis of evaluating its environmental risks.

The panel members were Arthur Kelman, a plant pathologist at University of Wisconsin at Madison, who was chairman; Stanley Falkow, a microbiologist at Stanford; Nina Fedoroff, a molecular biologist at the Carnegie Institution of Washington; Wyatt Anderson, a geneticist at the University of Georgia; and Simon Levin, an ecologist at Cornell. ■ **M.S.**