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EDITORIAL

Three Good Choices

"An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man," said Ralph Waldo Emerson, and no institution fits that description better than the government of a country. Whether the title is president or prime minister, the chief executive officer of a country is the major force in establishing its agenda and generating its ambiance. But governing a country is too big a job for one person to do alone, and the length of the shadow is largely influenced by the leader's appointments, who will then carry out his or her policies and provide the innovative new concepts that allow the implementation of his or her program.

The Clinton Administration had some spectacular mishaps in its early appointments, but several recent appointments in the science area suggest that the quality of appointments is now recognized as a major stepping stone to future success. Three appointments in the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the Department of Energy have elicited the admiration of the scientific community and augur well for the future development of scientific programs by the Clinton Administration.

The first of these is Harold Varmus, the nominee to be director of the National Institutes of Health. He is a Nobel laureate and an individual who has already demonstrated a strong civic conscience, wide-ranging experience, and scientific leadership in two areas of major interest to NIH and of crucial importance in cancer and AIDS: oncogenes and retroviruses. Varmus' background is almost unbelievably varied—an undergraduate major in English literature who edited the school paper, became an M.D., worked 3 months at a mission hospital in northern India, began his scientific career at NIH, and then moved to a faculty position at the University of California at San Francisco, where his research has collected almost every honor available to a biological scientist.

The second, Neal Lane, nominated to be director of the National Science Foundation, started his career as a physicist interested in theoretical studies of collision processes involving electrons, atoms, and molecules. After attaining distinction as a physicist, he branched off into the administration of physics, serving in numerous roles in physics societies and on government advisory panels. He served as chancellor of the Colorado Springs campus of the University of Colorado before returning to Rice University as provost and professor of physics. Solid experience as a primary researcher and an administrator of science appears an ideal background for the position of NSF director.

The third, Martha Krebs, who has been nominated as director of research of the Department of Energy, has a background similar to that of Dr. Lane in being not only a fine scientist with emphasis in the field of physics but also an astute administrator who understands the ways of politics. In an agency with massive clean-up and transition problems, these skills will be of great value.

These three excellent appointments, which have received resounding praise from the scientific community, provide a reflected glory to the individuals (Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala, the president's science adviser John Gibbons, and Secretary of Energy Hazel O'Leary) who established perceptive selection procedures and shepherded these appointments through the dangerous shoals of Washington bureaucracy. These appointments establish the principle that it is possible to find individuals who combine diversity, civic responsibility, administrative ability, and professional excellence. In the highest reaches of government, where decisions are made that affect millions of people, it is right for the public to insist that individuals having these high posts have the highest level of judgment and wide expertise. Future decisions of the Clinton Administration will undoubtedly be helped enormously by this quality scientific leadership and the individuals may in concert help achieve the Administration's stated goals of more jobs, better health, and a higher standard of living. The Administration may avoid in the future the temporizing and vacillation that has marked the poor compromises reached in the space station and the Super Collider decisions. Perhaps the luster of these appointees will even earn some respect from a Congress that in recent years has stepped beyond its correct role of establishing broad general goals to micromanaging of specific grants and administrative practices in science for which neither legal training nor campaign experience provides the appropriate expertise. The good news is that an excellent science team appears to be in formation and should be a great benefit to the Administration, the country, and the world.

Daniel E. Koshland, Jr.