

interests of the nation." And Cornelius Pings, president of the Association of American Universities, says the attempt to give NSF a more practical bent is "definitely a mistake." Pings says giving the NSF a large role in technology transfer would "distort" the agency and, in the end, not accomplish the aims being sought by the Senate subcommittee. And Representative George Brown (D-CA), chairman of the House Committee on Science and Technology, is planning to try to persuade Congress to

modify the language of the Senate report—as he did last year.

While most academics are likely to agree with the critics that the Senate report risks pushing the NSF too far into practical applications, one well-known figure in the community—former NSF director Erich Bloch, now at the private Competitiveness Council in Washington, D.C.—says he thinks the report is pretty much on target. People must realize, Bloch said, that "the days of Vannevar Bush are over and gone." NSF is not

the "private province of single investigators any longer." Sounding almost like a Clinton acolyte, Bloch said, "The whole world is changing....It's time to reinvent NSF."

The debate over the relative importance of fundamental versus directed research in NSF's portfolio is clearly going to haunt the agency for some time. It is certainly going to be one of the thorniest issues to confront the NSF director-designate, Neal Lane, when he makes his debut before Congress this fall.

—Eliot Marshall

SCIENCE POLICY

White House Plans New Science Council

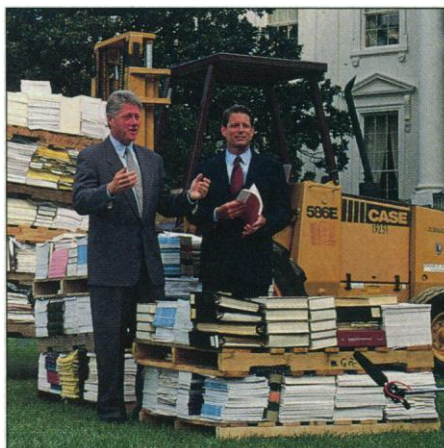
Tucked in among the ideas for cutting waste and red tape in Vice President Al Gore's plan for reinventing government is a proposal that could have a significant impact on U.S. science: the idea of creating a powerful new National Science and Technology Council. As described in the report released by Gore on 7 September,* the new panel would operate within the White House and serve as a policy center similar to the National Security Council, the National Economic Council, and the Domestic Policy Council. Science has learned that a plan to carry out this recommendation is likely to become a reality within the next week or two, if President Clinton signs a memorandum now being drafted for his approval.

If the reform goes forward, it would give the president's office centralized control over the government's \$76 billion in annual expenditures on research and development. White House staffers would be more directly involved in planning and coordinating science programs at the federal agencies. At present, agencies set their own budget priorities in negotiations with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB); the new arrangement presumably would have them clear their plans with the science council as well.

Presidential science adviser John Gibbons has been working for more than a month to prepare the way for this management change, laying plans for the dissolution of several existing policy groups—including the National Space Council, the Federal Coordinating Council on Science, Engineering, and Technology (FCCSET), and the National Critical Materials Council. Clinton may need congressional approval to phase these out, since they were established by acts of Congress. According to White House officials, all three groups would be subsumed under the new super council, which probably would be staffed by the Office of Science and

Technology Policy and chaired by the president himself, as the others are.

Gibbons declined to comment last week on which agencies or officials would be included in the proposed science council but said he expects to discuss it publicly soon. White House officials this week said Clinton has approved the general idea of such a council and they expect him to endorse a memo establishing it within a matter of days. The



Reinventing science policy? Clinton, Gore, and the blueprints for reform.

council, according to White House officials, will adhere to the general outlines proposed in Gore's report, which the Vice President's staff apparently wrote independently of Gibbons' staff.

The report praises FCCSET for leading interagency initiatives in the past but notes that "FCCSET lacks the teeth to set priorities, direct policy, and participate fully in the budget process. It can't compel agencies to participate in its projects, nor can it tell agencies how to spend funds." As a remedy, the Gore report says, the White House should create a National Science and Technology Council to manage R&D "more forcefully."

Although the jurisdiction and authority of the proposed science council have yet to be spelled out, at least one leader—Frank Press, science adviser to President Jimmy

Carter and the former president of the National Academy of Sciences—has already given the idea his blessing. If the council provides for better coordination and stronger leadership in science policy, says Press, "I would support it instantaneously." He notes that FCCSET had an "uneven record" of leadership, mainly because it "wasn't fully integrated with OMB [the Office of Management and Budget] in the budget making process, because OMB doesn't like to let go of that capacity." If the new council is to succeed, Press says, it should be able to set priorities and allocate funds in the R&D budget.

While the proposal to give science a boost within the White House was the most striking plan affecting research agencies in the Gore report, it was not the only one. Among other recommendations:

- Close the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, a medical school within the Department of Defense originally designed to compensate for a doctor shortage in the military, saving \$300 million.

- Save another \$300 million by consolidating "current and proposed polar satellite programs"—both military and civilian—under the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

- Conduct the decennial census in year 2000 by "sampling rather than more costly methods of counting nonrespondents" as a way of increasing efficiency. This would put the White House on one side of a complex debate on statistical methods now under way within the Census Bureau.

- Establish a broad plan to use new electronic technology for handling federal data. Because of its expertise in building and managing computer networks, the National Science Foundation (NSF) is likely to be dragged into an effort to develop systems for processing government forms electronically.

These proposals are laid out in the Gore report in general terms. The details will appear in the next month as the Administration releases "backup documents," including a thick volume on "reinventing" federal science programs prepared by NSF. At that point, Congress will weigh in.

—Eliot Marshall

*"Creating a Government that Works Better and Costs Less: Report of the National Performance Review," Office of the Vice President, 7 September 1993.