Committee, Anyone?

When President Clinton created the National Science and Technology Council (NSTC) in November 1993, he promised it would "streamline" science policy in the White House and "establish clear goals" for the government's $70 billion R&D investment. With a status equal to the powerful National Security Council it would, on paper, be the most influential body ever established to plan and coordinate R&D programs across the federal government. Science adviser John Gibbons, who staffs the council, calls it a "virtual department" of science and technology.

Instead, what has evolved so far is something far less grandiose: a nearly indecipherable proliferation of panels—nine committees, 37 subcommittees, 21 working groups, and assorted other assemblies, some with more than 40 members—and an ever-growing list of research priorities. "It represents a government council dealing with government matters, and decisions about programs of government, reached by government, after discussions within government," noted Frank Rhodes, president of Cornell University, in a recent speech at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Rhodes, who chairs the National Science Board, which oversees the National Science Foundation (NSF), is no novice in the ways of Washington, but he confessed total ignorance about how NSTC functions. "Does it have staff?" he wondered. "Is it open to advice from the scientific community? I have been told it has met once. I find that inconceivable."

Rhodes is correct that the entire science council has met only once, last June. But that hasn't stopped the NSTC's panels from holding numerous gatherings: Each of the nine committees meets at least quarterly, and its subcommittees much more often. "We meet each month and have a nice discussion, but like a lot of committees, it's still looking for a mission," says one official who sits on an NSTC subcommittee. Several committees have also sponsored national forums, for which hundreds of leading figures write brief position papers that are digested by OSTP and turned into Administration policy documents. And the panels are anything but exclusive: One, a subcommittee on environmental technologies, has 58 members.

This churning of paper and people has produced a bewildering array of R&D priorities. Last month, OSTP's biennial report to Congress identified nine priority areas that correlate almost exactly with the names of the council's nine committees. In the same week, each one of those committees issued a strategic planning document that spells out priorities in dozens of areas. The president's 1996 budget request contained a list of six science and technology goals, and last summer a report based on an earlier NSTC forum spelled out five more.

Indeed, there are so many priorities that the Administration seems to have difficulty prioritizing them. For example, one of the seven NSTC initiatives highlighted in the president's budget is a new, $170 million effort on construction and building research. "It's our highest priority," asserts Mary Good, undersecretary for commerce and chair of the NSTC panel overseeing the activity. "The industry of construction represents one eighth of our economy, but there's almost no money being spent on research." However, Tim Newell, an aide to Gibbons, says that although the initiative is important, he doesn't see it as a priority. Rather, he calls it "illustrative" of activities common to all NSTC efforts in that they require interagency cooperation, meet a social goal, and involve public-private partnerships.

Definitions also hinder NSTC's attempt to get a better picture of what kinds of research the federal government buys with its $70 billion. Each year, the Office of Management and Budget asks each agency how much basic and applied research it funds, and this year it added a category for merit-reviewed research. But the Committee on Fundamental Science, co-chaired by NSF's Neal Lane and the National Institutes of Health's Harold Varmus, wanted a number that corresponds to its name. So it took the basic research number—$13.8 billion in fiscal year 1995—added a pinch of applied research (which totals $13.9 billion this year) and some funds for major equipment and facilities, and came up with a new figure—$20 billion—for a category that neither it, nor anyone else in government, can quite define. "We want to make things clearer, not muddier," Lane explains, "but we need to go further."

In spite of such difficulties, Gibbons has high hopes for NSTC. "It's already providing more coherent ways of getting at our science agenda," he says. Then he adds, in his characteristically folksy manner, "It's only 14 months old. That is hardly the gestation period of a horse."

–Jeffrey Mervis

Gibbons defends the number as "a very appropriate goal to talk about." But others see it as an example of how OSTP makes general statements that clash with budget realities. "I question why they put out a paper so wildly divergent from what they're doing in the budget," says Brown.

Power politics

Gibbons's power over federal R&D stems largely from his access to Gore—whom he has known since he worked as a physicist at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, Gore's home state. With a staff of 43 and a budget of only $5 million, Gibbons has no direct control over specific programs. But as part of the executive office of the president he has a bully pulpit to shape the direction of U.S. science and technology policy.

The first science advisers, serving in the midst of the Cold War, spent most of their time working on defense-related issues. But, starting with Yale University physicist Allan Bromley, who served President Bush, the job has increasingly focused on civilian issues. On biomedical research, OSTP has traditionally deferred to the Department of Health and Human Services, in particular the assistant secretary for health. "Jack's not an expert in this area, but his interest is sincere," says NIH Director Harold Varmus, adding that Gibbons has delegated everyday responsibility to biologist M.R.C. Greenwood, associate director for science, who is returning to academia at the end of the month.

That leaves energy, space, basic science, and the environment as the primary focus for OSTP. Space-related matters dominated Gibbons's first year, and his most visible success was deflecting an attack on the space station by Leon Panetta, then OMB director and now Clinton's chief of staff. Gibbons was a loyal soldier in a fight led by Gore and his domestic policy adviser, Greg Simon. OSTP joined with NASA to develop a plan that lopped billions of dollars off the cost of the space station, and Gibbons briefed Clinton on the plan hours before the decisive meeting in February 1993 in the Roosevelt Room. "Jack, I've done my homework," Clinton declared upon entering the room, waving a thick sheaf of papers that outlined the plan he eventually endorsed.

The space station fight set the standard for OSTP's role in White House debates: Gore provides the direction, and Gibbons looks after the details. Close associates say this is the style of management he used at OTA, providing technical advice while avoiding any hint of politics. Gore's interest in global change research, cars that get better mileage and emit less pollution, and sustainable development are, not *coincidentally*,