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EDITORIAL

A Department of Science (and Technology)?

Governmental research and development (R&D) reorganization, including a proposal for a department of science, is under debate in Congress today. Advocates of consolidation stress increased visibility for science, administrative cost savings, and improved coordination of R&D. The proposal also presumes that one or more current departments will be shut down. Opponents cite the strengths of today's pluralistic R&D system. Even if the department does not advance, the fate of R&D in Commerce and Energy must be decided if those departments are terminated. What makes sense for the present and the future?

Consolidation of R&D was first proposed more than 100 years ago by a congressional commission. The post–World War II organization of R&D was scarcely in place before new advocates of a centralized R&D system appeared. Periodic discussion—and rejection—of a science department should not lull anyone into thinking that the idea will fail again. The end of the Cold War, concerns about global competitiveness, debate about relevancy of fundamental research, possible elimination of one or more current departments, budget realities, and sizable congressional majorities in both houses of Congress for a party that was last in leadership nearly two generations ago produce a strong momentum for change. This confluence gives major R&D reorganization the greatest chance of passage in decades.

There should be an extensive, open policy discussion of the ramifications of R&D reorganization. What missions and functions would be better served? Would consolidation actually save money? Public debate should address these and other questions:

- Would a department of science work any better than corporate conglomerates and other large departments of government?
- If elevation of support for basic science to cabinet level is an objective, can a department of science exclude the National Institutes of Health?
- How would the National Science Foundation (NSF) fare in R&D reorganization, if space and environmental monitoring programs would be put in more direct competition with NSF funding than they are now, or if Energy's physical science research and particle accelerators were transferred to it?
- Given congressional criticisms of current industrial technology programs, what is the appropriate role of government in advancing technologies companies cannot pursue alone?
- Cabinet officers are loyal to constituencies and Congress as well as to their president; will the president get adequate advice under future organizational arrangements?
- Would R&D coordination be any better than it is now?
- Is a department the needed reorganization or should attention be given to more focused changes, for example, consolidating environmental monitoring functions in one agency?
- Will congressional jurisdictions be rearranged to accommodate the changes?
- Should the country be consolidating R&D when some industrial nations with centralized departments of science are dismantling them?

These are but a few of the policy issues that should be debated.

Many claim that our pluralistic R&D system, though not perfect and doubtless in need of scrutiny, has served national interests well. It will not do to rely on that argument today. The mood in Washington and among the electorate is for change. Scientists and engineers, professional societies, university and industry associations, informed citizens, the administration, and congressional committees should join the discussion and ensure that all arguments are on the table. The policy purposes and functions of a department or other R&D reorganization, not just the administrative provisions, should be fully debated. Our scientific and technological preeminence today results from the vision of national political and science leaders whose penetrating debates and compromises in the decade after World War II set up the current R&D system. Organizational changes made in the mid-1990s will profoundly influence government R&D policy until well into the next century. As the current discussion goes forward, all of us need to understand the issues and register our views.

Philip M. Smith

Philip M. Smith spent over two decades in government participating in R&D policy-making and another decade as executive officer of the National Research Council. He is currently writing a book about science and government. His e-mail address is pmsmith@nas.edu.