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Advice for Congress

The House Committee on Science and Astronautics has asked the National Academy of Sciences to answer two difficult questions:

"What level of Federal support is needed to maintain for the United States a position of leadership through basic research in the advancement of science and technology and their economic, cultural, and military applications?"

"What judgment can be reached on the balance of support now being given by the Federal Government to the various fields of scientific endeavor, and on adjustments that should be considered, either within existing levels of over-all support or under conditions of increased or decreased over-all support?"

These questions constitute the first use of a new arrangement for the National Academy of Sciences to provide Congress with information and advice upon request. To answer the two questions, the Academy has appointed a committee of 15 distinguished members.

The committee's replies will be used by Congress in conjunction with the advice it receives from other sources. Congress will continue to receive the budget requests of the executive agencies. It will continue to hold legislative hearings and to seek the views of selected advisers. It will get plenty of advice on political, jurisdictional, and similar aspects from the executive agencies and its own members. Special scientific and technical programs will have their ardent supporters. And critics of the recommendations from any of these sources will get their day in court. Scientists should therefore have no feeling of surprise or offense if recommendations of the Academy committee are not all adopted.

Nevertheless, the establishment of the new arrangement constitutes a highly significant development in government-science relationships and presents the Academy with an opportunity to render Congress a valuable and distinctive service that it does not receive from any other source.

If the committee members were to submit individual answers, little would be gained over having 15 witnesses testify individually in legislative hearings. If the committee were to report only what it could agree upon quickly, it would not add substantially to what Congress might learn from other sources.

There is opportunity to do a far more penetrating job, one that will require much solid work by committee and staff, but one that will much more distinctively fulfill the challenging role of scientific adviser to Congress. A thoroughly helpful answer to the first question—on the level of support necessary to maintain leadership—will require analysis of trends in Germany, Japan, the U.S.S.R., and elsewhere, as well as in the U.S. A comparable answer to the second question—on balance of support among various fields—calls for an examination of each field in terms of the existing state of knowledge, the kinds of problems that are ripe for further study, the personnel and other resources available, and the possible or probable ramifications of further progress in understanding.

Answers at this level would provide Congress—and scientists also—with information that can be obtained from no other source and with guidance that would most assuredly have a constructive influence on future legislation.—DAEL WOLFLE