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Public Challenge of Government Action

The current public debate about the ABM has served to dramatize a growing gap in the American political process. Increasingly, decisions must be made on issues that involve considerable scientific or technological complexity, as a result of which the agencies of government or their contractors in effect have a near-monopoly on the relevant information. The old problem of "who represents the public" in government decision-making now takes on a new and more serious dimension.

Many have been concerned for some time about this, and in recent years there have been useful developments: new techniques for providing independent advice for the Congress; the growth of citizens' groups in specific subject areas, able to make independent analyses; even the establishment of the President's Science Advisory Committee in the White House as a means of challenging agency positions on complex technological questions. As useful as these steps have been, they do not meet the problem for today and for the future.

The exciting and encouraging characteristic of the current ABM debate is that, for the first time since World War II, there is a major public challenge of a complex technological project, and a refusal to accept the usual assurances that secret data and intelligence would justify the project. In this debate the nation is fortunate in that many individuals who have had, or still have, a direct role in the subject have been willing to speak out publicly. But these individuals cannot be expected to be familiar with all issues as they arise, or to continue to be in a position to spend the professional and political capital required by direct public involvement. In any case, for most issues the occasional participation of individuals alone is not enough, for extensive continuous analysis is usually required, and a more obviously disinterested base necessary.

It seems clear that what is needed in our political process are new independent mechanisms charged with the task of developing information and analyses of important areas of public interest that have major scientific and technological content. In effect, the nation must consciously develop the capability to challenge government actions from a base independent of the government and of its policies.

In principle, the university is the primary locus in our society for critical examination of social issues from a base of strong analytical capability characterized by a striving for unbiased scholarship. But, are American universities now sufficiently independent? Can means for support for such policy criticism be found that will protect the universities in necessarily sensitive areas? Is it in fact wise for universities to take on major new functions that will be exceedingly difficult to perform, that may threaten traditional functions, and that will require new capabilities and organization while bringing about increased involvement in public confrontations on politically sensitive issues?

The answers to these questions are not clear, but it is essential that they be explored. If the universities remain aloof, are there other candidates capable of meeting a challenge of this magnitude? In any case, if the concern behind the March 4th events means anything at all, it represents a growing demand that the universities in fact find ways to perform this task of public policy analysis and criticism.

—EUGENE B. SKOLNIKOFF, *Department of Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology*