Administration Talent Search: Alternatives to the Buddy System

The filling of science-based positions in government is a pebble that gave the Nixon Administration two of its more painful stumbles during its early days in office. The nonappointments of Franklin A. Long to be director of the National Science Foundation and of John H. Knowles to be assistant secretary of HEW for health and scientific affairs were embarrassing evidence of merit for the job failing to reign supreme over such considerations as a man's political beliefs and the enemies they had made for him. Since these incidents, the Administration has tightened up its recruiting methods, and the batch of new appointments to science-based agencies that have been made in the last few months or are now in the works, pose an interesting test of the new system. New heads have been appointed to NASA and the Atomic Energy Commission, and the talent scouts are hunting for men to direct the National Science Foundation and the impending metamorphosis of the National Cancer Institute, four positions whose holders can heavily influence the federal use and conduct of science. How well is the Administration's new recruitment system working? What qualities do the talent scouts scout for in candidates for science-based agencies? How much say does the scientific community have in the selection of those appointed to rule over it?

Since last November, the White House talent search system has been conducted by Frederic V. Malek, 34, special assistant to the President for personnel. Malek, who made his million in business in his early thirties, gained the reputation of a tough manager as deputy undersecretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Soon after being called to the White House as personnel chief, Malek was chosen as the hatchet man for the Administration's maladroit firing of Secretary of the Interior Walter J. Hickel and six of his aides.

Malek and the professional executive recruiters he has brought to the White House have applied the talent search methods of the business world to government appointments. The essence of the method is to make contact with a large number of people in the field concerned—these are called the "source network"—and to use the network both as a source of suggestions for potential candidates and as referees for the names that come up. The recruiting staff make background checks on candidates and, after each sifting, refer the list of survivors back to the source network for further comment. The science of executive recruiting, according to a member of the Malek team, "is to make other people—your source network—make the bulk of your decisions for you; it's not a matter of your own hunch or intuition after interviewing a candidate."

Criteria for Selection

Malek has overhauled the tactics of the White House talent search but still works to much the same strategy as before. An important element of the strategy, according to a former Nixon aide, is to find candidates who are not afraid of shaking up an agency. "Every president faces the problem of bureaucratic inertia," says the aide, "and the only way to overcome it is to put new people in." Malek also stresses the importance of vigorous management and a candidate's ability to make his mark felt quickly. Both Edward E. David, who succeeded Lee A. DuBridge as the President's science adviser, and James R. Schlesinger, the new chairman of the AEC, are seen as examples of effecting changes in an agency by appointing a new style of leader. David, in contrast to the unbroken line of academic scientists he succeeded, was previously a director of research at the Bell Laboratories. "For the head of the Office of Science and Technology, the problem was to find a man who could work within the system and be respected outside the system," says a former Nixon aide.

According to the same source, Schlesinger, a nonscientist, was chosen to replace Glenn T. Seaborg at the AEC for much the same reasons. "Without implying any lack of respect for Seaborg, the AEC's biggest problems are not those requiring leadership by a scientist per se."

The choice of Schlesinger illustrates another element of the Administration's recruitment strategy—that of looking for candidates who have not been involved in the policy debates they will have to deal with. "Examples of this are McElroy, Fletcher, Schlesinger, and Jaffe [heads, respectively, of the NSF, NASA, AEC, and the Special Action Office for Drug Abuse Prevention]," says the former Nixon aide; "the point of commonality of all of these men is that, prior to their appointment, none was concerned with the internal politics of his agency. Fletcher was not involved in the manned versus unmanned space flight dispute; Schlesinger had not been caught up in the industrialist-environmentalist controversy over nuclear power plants; McElroy had not taken up a position on the academic-nonacademic axis with regard to the direction of the NSF's programs."

One of the pitfalls in the talent search process, as seen from the White House, is to pick up a regent rather than a manager. "People who have established themselves in universities or industry," says Malek, "often lose their desire to look at the nuts and bolts—you have to be careful you don't get someone who no longer likes to get his hands dirty." Another danger is being overly swayed by plaudits from the media in favor of a particular candidate. "A scientist," says Malek, "may have earned a well-deserved reputation with the media because of his articulate descriptions of his experiments, say, but that is only one part of the equation."

Another influence the White House recruiters try to resist is the pressure from the supporters of candidates who are actively canvassing for the job. "Almost invariably, the man who is running for a job does not get it," says a former White House staffer. "Political heat for scientific jobs always turned me off. For one science-based agency we had a couple of guys who thought they could get it by having 30 congressmen write in on their behalf. But political heat is different from political support, which, of course, we welcome."

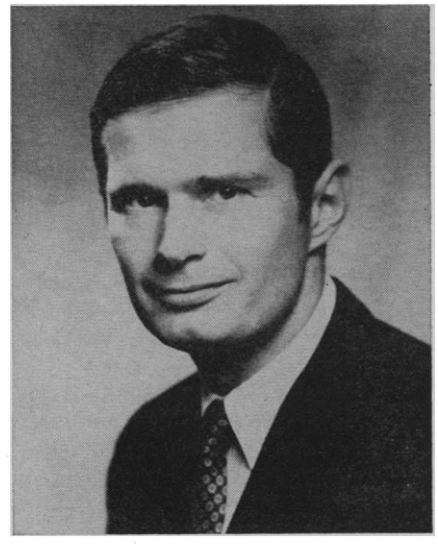
How far are the views of the scientific community taken into account in appointments to science-based agencies? According to Malek, "The guy must have the respect of the scientific

community. But that does not mean we have to get the person who is the most respected of all. What is necessary is that he pass a certain threshold level of respect." "The wishes of the scientific community are important and must be taken into account," says a former Nixon aide, "but the needs of the President and of the agency must rank first. Against that, it is often hard to find out what scientists want, since there isn't really any sort of cohesiveness in the scientific community. Also, they are more tuned in to the needs of their own people than those of the agency."

Although the White House talent scouts may confer extensively with individual scientists in filling science-based posts, it seems that formal consultation with bodies representative of the scientific community is pretty much limited to what is required by statute. For example, the President is required to listen to the advice of the National Science Board in appointing the director of the National Science Foundation. The choice of Schlesinger as chairman of the AEC (and of William O. Doub to replace the late Commissioner Theos J. Thompson) has caused some unhappiness in the scientific community because there is now only one scientist on the five-man commission. James C. Fletcher was a more acceptable choice as administrator of NASA, since, having done time on the President's Science Advisory Committee, he qualifies as a member of the scientific establishment.

Political Beliefs

How important are a candidate's political beliefs? One of the Nixon Administration's first appointments at the head of a science-based agency was the directorship of the NSF which, in a dizzying series of events in April 1969, was offered to Franklin A. Long of Cornell University, withdrawn because of Long's opinions about the antiballistic missile system, reoffered by Nixon after representations from the scientific community, declined by Long, and finally devolved upon the present incumbent, William D. McElroy, who has recently announced his intention to leave. It may well be because of the Long episode that White House aides are emphatic in asserting that political beliefs are of minimal importance in selecting candidates to head science-based agencies. "We want someone whose views are compatible with the Administration's in the area concerned



Frederic V. Malek

—for example, we would not appoint someone to the cancer agency who wanted to run it in a quite different way—but beyond that, a man's political philosophy is not a key issue at all," says a White House aide.

Just how far this principle is put into practice is hard to judge; the Long and Knowles affairs have not been repeated, but none of the recent appointees to science-based posts happen to hold publicly stated positions that conflict with those of the Administration. McElroy, though a Democrat, had not spoken out on the arms race issues that seem to have disqualified Long. And it has yet to be seen whether the candidate backed by the National Science Board to replace McElroy will be acceptable to the Administration. But though many remain skeptical, at least one influential member of the scientific community is prepared to give the Administration the benefit of the doubt. "Only if a man has taken a strong, publicly visible position that might embarrass the Administration would it affect an appointment," says Harvey Brooks, dean of engineering at Harvard.

Search for Cancer Head

The thoroughness of the Malek system is perhaps best illustrated by the still current search for a director of the proposed new cancer agency. Most of the staff work has been done by Frank P. Rocco, an executive recruiter with Arthur Young and Company of New York and a former member of Malek's White House staff.

Rocco, who has spent about half his time since 1 May this year on the talent hunt, says that the starting point for defining the job was the report by the Senate Panel of Consultants on the Conquest of Cancer, in which the plan for an independent cancer agency was first suggested. Rocco also invited some eight organizations—such as the American Cancer Society, the American Medical Association and, through the OST, the National Academy of Sciences and the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology—to suggest job specifications for the post. "By May 1st, we had a pretty good idea of our ideal man," Rocco says. "We then went back to all the interested parties and asked them who they thought would fit the bill."

Out of this source came 160 names, from which the White House team removed all scientists who had had no opportunity to display management skills; these names will be considered for research jobs in the cancer agency. The 80 survivors of the preliminary winnowing process were submitted to a review panel, set up by Rocco, which has about ten members, most of them representatives of interest groups that had been asked to suggest candidates. On the basis of the review panel's judgments, the 80 candidates were ranked according to the extent to which they fullfilled the desired criteria.

To supplement the original list of candidates, Rocco then set up an independent search panel to ascertain the likely whereabouts of men who possessed the qualities judged ideal for the head of the new cancer agency. The panel replied that the ideal man was probably a corporation president with an M.D. degree, the director of a large research institute, and so forth.

"We wanted to be sure that every potential candidate in the United States had an opportunity to be considered," Rocco says. "Based on the search team's suggestions we ran through 30,000 potential locations. From these we got 30 potential candidates, almost none of whom had turned up on the original list."

The two lists were then combined and the top ten names given what Rocco calls "a very intensive evaluation by the review panel, so as to build up a case study of each man." As of last week, the ten candidates are still in the running and no final date has been set for a decision. Six of the ten come from the original list of candidates, four from the location search devised by Rocco.

Rocco declines to name the members of the review panel, on the grounds that organizations not represented on it will feel left out; he says that in selecting the panel, "Anybody who has ever expressed an opinion on how the cancer agency should be run was contacted and encouraged to participate." In addition to the ordinary review panel, Rocco has set up a scientific group to assess the research competence of the candidates.

Malek's talent search system must ultimately stand or fall by the quality of the candidates it has helped to select, but the least that can be said for it is that it is thorough. Whatever the merits of creating an independent cancer agency (which most scientists believe are few), it is no bad ideal to give every potential candidate in the country a chance to be chosen director. To what extent is Malek's approach an improvement on the previous system? "The people before Fred were highly political and they were not professional recruiters," says a former Nixon aide; "the general practice of recruiting people has now shifted. Originally, they tried to find *the* candidate for the job and then approached him. But Fred Malek has tried to develop a list of qualified candidates for any given job, in order to give the President the greater number of options."

Asked what changes he has made in the recruitment system, Malek stresses the professionalism of his staff: "They know who to contact, who to check out, how to do background research. We are devoting more professional time to recruitment and doing a more thorough job. As a result, we are not as dependent as we were in the past on those recommended by special interest groups."

According to Rocco, there are several important advantages in the Malek system. "Before Malek, people were brought to Washington mostly by colleague recruiting. A man would offer a job to his friends or ask them to suggest candidates. So all the names you got would tend to come from the same population of thought. There is no way to measure how good or bad the new system has been, but at least it makes for diverse inputs in terms of ideas."

Another advantage of the Malek system is that it provides an alternative route into Washington. "Before Malek, the only way you could get to Washington was if you had friends," a White House aide observes. "Now, this still works, but there is also the chance that if you are good in your field someone in Malek's group will hear about you. For example, none of the top ten candidates for the cancer job really has any pull in Washington. And someone who comes in because he is good has no obligations to pay off to the friends who brought him in—he can call the shots as he sees them."

—NICHOLAS WADE

ACS: Disgruntled Chemists Seek New Activism from an Old Society

A great many of the American Chemical Society's 112,000 members work for corporations that have been widely accused, rightly or wrongly, of fouling the environment and of merchandising death in the form war materials. But to the continuing amazement of its leadership, the ACS slid through yet another national meeting in Washington last week, utterly undisturbed by the acrimonious confrontations on social issues that have shaken up the meetings of other national scientific organizations lately, notably the AAAS.

Nevertheless, "There is a revolution going on in the American Chemical Society," in the view of Alan C. Nixon. And Alan Nixon, a retired industrial chemist from Berkeley and one of three candidates for the presidency of the society, ought to know. In large measure, he started it.

The Nixon brand of revolution (he is not related to the President) is a gentlemanly affair; but still, it is having its effect on the character of this staid and rather donnish organization. For one thing, Alan Nixon has thoroughly politicized the society's largely honorific presidential election process, in which a nominating committee customarily taps two distinguished scientists for a polite contest, and in which blatant electioneering is considered the worst indiscretion. This year, Nixon, who by his own description is not a distinguished scientist, is on the ballot by popular demand and not because the nominating committee wanted him there. Even worse, he is campaigning vigorously, and as a consequence, so are his opponents, George S. Hammond of the California Institute of Technology and William F. Mosher of the University of Delaware.

The central issue of this unlikely match is not war or pollution, but the economic plight of the nation's 186,000 chemists and chemical engineers and, by implication, that of the scientific community at large. Backed by an ill-defined but apparently sizable constituency of discontented chemists, many of whom are among the embittered jobless, Nixon is striving to prod the society into stepping beyond its present role as a passive forum for research in the Renaissance tradition of scientific societies and to adopt a second, activist, role as an advocate for chemists and as a protector of their livelihood. "I want to build a system in the ACS to take care of chemists' professional needs—a system that concerns itself with the human problems of chemists as employees," he says. He eschews any notion of unionizing chemists, but he feels that the ACS ought to be using the weight of its prestige to push for better job security, higher salaries, and improved fringe and separation benefits—particularly for industrial chemists who lack the protection of tenure.

Nixon is unabashedly in favor of lobbying on the part of large scientific bodies, much in the fashion of the American Medical Association, and he went so far as to suggest last week that the ACS assess its employed members $5 or $10 to establish a political arm for just that purpose. "Most legislators haven't any idea who we are and what our problems are," he said. "They think the ACS is a branch of the