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Departure of the President's Science Adviser

The resignation of Edward David and the likelihood that the office of the President's science adviser will be abolished come as a disappointing shock. David is a scientist-engineer of very broad competence who maintained intellectual integrity in the emotional heat of politics. He was helpful in meeting the many short-term demands of the Presidency, while working constructively toward long-term objectives.

The abolition of the office of science adviser is one of many consequences of President Nixon's determination to reorganize the Executive Office of the President. Over the years, through congressional action and otherwise, the number of people reporting to the President has increased to unmanageable proportions. The President is moving toward decreasing the number of people reporting to him and toward cutting the size of the staff employed by the Executive Office of the President by as much as 50 percent. The details of the final structure are still hazy, but it is probable that, when the smoke clears, the President's Science Advisory Committee and the Office of Science and Technology will have vanished.

Many of the activities of a President's adviser must necessarily be hidden from view. For example, coordination of the many branches of government having a role in some technological matter needs to be accomplished without fanfare. There are ways, however, of getting a glimpse of the adviser's thinking and intellectual development. During his tenure, David made a substantial number of public appearances. His speeches make good reading: they are substantive, and they reveal a curious, probing, growing mind. During his stay in Washington, he never stopped learning.

Under David, science and technology had visibility and a defender at the highest level. He saw to it that the budgets for civilian science and technology increased. But he was more than a mere advocate. He moved toward changing the emphasis of programs in accord with the changing temper of the times, yet he did not neglect long-term matters.

One of the criticisms of Presidential science advisers is that they often became so involved in the day-to-day fighting of political brush fires that they lost sight of the forest. David avoided frittering away his energies and concentrated on a limited number of activities of greatest potential impact. For example, his office chose to take a leading role in the energy problem. Another area in which he has been extraordinarily perceptive is the role of civilian technology in world affairs. Civilian technology is supplanting money and military power as currency in the conduct of international diplomacy. The U.S. public and most politicians seem to be about the only influential people in the world still unaware of this. David moved vigorously in capitalizing on this neglected asset, and his negotiations with the Russians have seemed to be particularly useful.

It is to be hoped that the drastic changes being implemented will not leave science without a spokesman or influence in the White House. At the very least, it is essential that some scientist connected with the government be designated as the chief scientist.

For years most of the scientific establishment has fought against the creation of a Department of Science. It has been argued that science and technology permeate the activities of virtually all executive agencies and that centralization would not be wise. The argument has been driven home too well. In consequence, there is now danger that science, while being everywhere, will be nowhere.—PHILIP H. ABELSON